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Toward a Nation of Thinkers

The Readaloud Renaissance: Phase Two

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Until recently, I had this recurring nightmare: sometime in the next century a great-grandchild of mine, curious about her ancestors, asks "...and what work did Great-Grandmother Arlene do?" When her mother answers that "She wrote books," my descendant replies, "But what's a book, Mommy?"

I haven't experienced that nightmare much in the last few years, thanks to Jim Trelease, Margaret Mary Kimmel, Elizabeth Segel, and others who spearheaded the first phase of a "readaloud renaissance"—one that sensitized a new generation of parents, teachers, and librarians to the high correlation between a child's being read to and her success as a reader. Several years ago in *The Five Owls* (Jan./Feb. 1989), Margaret Kimmel and Elizabeth Segel described how reading aloud to children, once an accepted practice in homes and schools, had nearly passed out of vogue by the 1970s. Their article was a call to return to reading aloud to children. Thankfully, that call has largely been answered. Today, reading aloud to children in homes, daycare centers, classrooms, and libraries is once again recommended by educators as standard practice. More and more parents are reading to their children at home. What's more, many primary care physicians and pediatricians now prescribe that parents read aloud to their children at an early age.

Of necessity, during the 1980s Trelease and others emphasized the obligation of reading aloud to children in order that they be better prepared to be "literate" through the proper decoding of print messages. Now, however, it is time to take reading aloud a step further, into the next millennium. The goal of phase two of the readaloud renaissance is to help foster not merely a nation of decoders, but a generation of critical thinkers! The basic premise of this crucial stage is that reading aloud, and then using the book as a springboard for discussion, can help children become creative, critical thinkers.

Thus, the level of responsibility for each of us who are readalouders—be we parents, teachers, librarians, or daycare providers—is much greater in the second phase than in the first. In phase two, the readalouders' role is defined by three



Illustration by Edward Ardizzone from *The Blackbird in the Lilac* by James Reeves (Oxford University Press, 1952).

related activities: (1) selecting books with a strong core reason for being; (2) interpreting the author's message through the manner in which the books are read aloud; and (3) facilitating children's reactions and response to books by leading discussions of topics, issues, and concerns these books raise, as well as the ideas and feelings they stimulate.

What makes a young listener respond to hearing a book read? To a large extent, the very same thing that makes the child who is read to *want* to read: the realization that there is magic between the book's covers—in the story it tells, the feelings it elicits, and the

information, perspectives, and ideas it reveals. It's up to the readalouders to awaken that sense of magical expectation by serving as an interpreter between the book's author and the listener, much as an actor interprets a playwright's intent to the audience.

While a parent reading aloud often has the luxury of one child's undivided attention (and might even get by with a dry monotone if there's enough cuddling involved), it is much different for us teachers, librarians, or care providers who are reading to a small group or whole roomful of children. We readalouders must draw in our listeners and keep them engaged. We must be expressive, uninhibited readers. And as interpreters of the author's message, we must put it across to our listeners.

Interpretation of the author's message begins with the readalouders' assessment of the book's core reason for being. Is the book fun or entertaining (reason enough, occasionally, for a book's existence) or is there more? What is the author trying to say? And how is the author trying to convey it? For example, is the tone in which the book is written—perhaps a quiet, pensive narrative that asks to be read in a quiet pensive manner—telling the reader and listener something? Similarly, a story that's developed through the words and actions of several lead characters practically commands that the readalouders employ several voices in telling the tale. (For example, one loudly and staunchly, one quickly, one quietly, one fast-paced, one in a high-pitched voice, and another low.)

The readalouder can interpret the author's purpose by varying reading pace, volume, voice range, tone of voice, etc. In doing so, the readalouder also conveys his own perception of the author's purposes. The readalouder's interpretation sets the stage for discussion. The more expressive the reading, the more engaged the listeners. And the more engaged they are, the more interested they become in the book's contents. As both psychological and audience research studies indicate, the more involved the listeners, the more they will take away from the experience, and the greater their response to it.

Discussion is critical, particularly with preschoolers and children in the early grades. Many short picture books hold powerful insight within. Though we think nothing of discussing a novel with young adults or talking about chapter books with middle-graders, how readily do we think of *really discussing* a story with even younger children? It is important to note that any book worth reading aloud to children is worth discussing with them—no matter how young they may be or how limited their verbal skills may appear to be. To bypass discussing books when reading aloud to young children is to provide them with only half a loaf: a stimulus with no avenue for response. It is to provide only one-way communication, rather than two-way communication as it should be. Engaging children to respond to what they have heard is to provide them with a most important developmental opportunity.

Using the book as a springboard for discussion requires critical reading skills. Many of us may not have acquired these skills until we were well into high school, college or beyond. My own experience is a good example of not having acquired crucial skills until more than *fifteen years* after I could and should have had them. Yet, paradoxically, my experience also exemplifies the good that parents can do in establishing reading readiness, and an eagerness for literacy. My mother read to me by the hour from the time I can first remember until I began school. By the time I entered first grade I already loved books, associating them with pleasure and knowledge. I quickly learned to

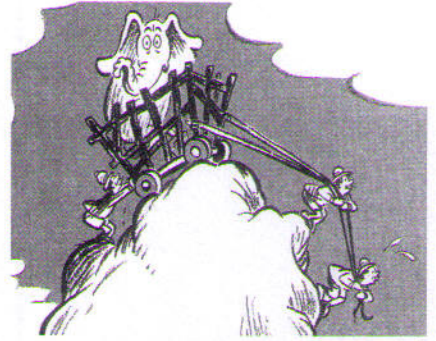


Illustration by Dr. Seuss from *Horton Hatches the Egg* (Random House, 1940).

read, then read out the school library, and then the town library. By the summer I was eleven, much to my mother's dismay, I had read *Gone With The Wind*. Later that summer I confiscated a complimentary copy of *The Kinsey Report* from my psychiatrist father's den, and—much to his dismay—read it, dictionary in hand.

Yet, I did not really learn how to read in a creative, critical, meaningful way until my sophomore year at the University of Minnesota. There, during the late 1950s and 1960s, Pulitzer prize winning poet and author John Berryman kept his students on the edge of their seats when he taught Humanities in the Modern World. Stories of how he taught us the art of critical reading, and its concomitant critical thinking, are legendary. He felt he was doing remedial work with a bunch of college students—which he was. "Don't tell me what words you saw on the page!" he would shriek. "Tell me what you think!" Suffice it to say that Berryman, whose colleagues and friends included most of the other important poets and authors of his generation, taught from the perspective of the reader's need to ferret out the author's core meaning—as if in conversation with the book's creator.

Berryman paced the room, reading aloud long passages, then challenged our comments as we discussed the role of each of the book's major, big picture ideas. We needed to first identify the large-scale themes of each book, then recognize how the interrelationships of characters with one another (and with various facets of the plot) contributed to those major themes. This process also extended to the clues with which the author provided about various characterizations, such as the names characters were given. Of course, Berryman also challenged us to recognize the interrela-

tionships of various themes within the book, the roles of allegory and metaphor, the role of the reader's own responses, reactions, and projections in appreciating and understanding the content of the book.

My own immediate reaction to learning to read in this way was anger. Why on earth hadn't I known this before? It seemed that teaching me to decode was only half of what reading was about. I vowed to ever after use the Berryman reading method to instill in children, at as early an age as possible, the joy of learning creative, critical reading and thinking skills.

For example, in reading aloud the Dr. Seuss classic *Horton Hatches The Egg* to preschoolers, I have them join in the refrain "I meant what I said, and I said what I meant, and an elephant's faithful one hundred per cent." We all have a good time and they gain ownership in the story.

When we've finished reading the story, I ask them "What is this story really about?" Usually several hands shoot up with variations on, "It's about Horton doing what he says he will...." That then is our springboard for bringing in the concept of keeping a promise and the responsibility that goes with it. Who was responsible for the egg? Did Mayzie abrogate her responsibilities to the egg when she left it with Horton and did not keep her promise—"I won't be gone long sir, I give you my word...?" What made Horton keep the egg in the first place? Why did he assume responsibility to stay with it? Did he think that he should? Or, was he compelled by some force deep within his nature? Later, when I ask them, "Who has rights to the elephantbird which Horton hatches, Mayzie or Horton—the one who laid the egg or the one who hatched it?", some argue for Mayzie, some for Horton, and some see a need for joint custody. In their discussions, the children in fact grapple with questions of nature versus nurture. Some children speak from their own experiences: They see themselves as similar to the elephantbird.

When discussing *Charlotte's Web* with second and third graders, I introduce the barnyard as a metaphor for life: the fertility of the soil, the cycles of the year,

the ultimate cycle of life and death. Once children have this frame of reference they quickly realize that the book is far more than a wonderful story about life in the barnyard. They are hungry to figure out what else author E.B. White intended them to understand. Through discussion the children recognize that while they feel sad about Charlotte the spider's death, it was not a tragedy, but a part of the natural life cycle wherein her goal was accomplished with the birth of her offspring and the spinning of her final web. Nothing is more fun for the children than playing sleuth as they ferret out more examples of the book's major premises. For instance, once I explain to them that the names of the characters are generally an author's clue about the person and/or about the themes of the story, they run with it. In *Charlotte's Web* the major human character is a young girl named Fern Arable. A fern, of course, is a plant; and arable means "ploughable," "fertile," "plantable"—thus the Arable farm was indeed a perfect name and setting for White's barnyard.

Students from groups that read and thoroughly discussed books such as *The Hobbit* and *Charlotte's Web* when they were first, second and third graders as far back as the 1970s have stopped by, called, and written over the years to thank me for opening the door early in their lives to the joy of critical thinking through reading. They say they have, in turn, passed this learning on to others in their schools and homes. Similarly, children with whom I read and discussed picture books when they were preschoolers have thanked me time and again for showing them how to really think about a book from their earliest listening days.

Many other teachers, librarians, and parents also find that the early teaching of critical thinking through reading really works! A common denominator of our findings is that critical reading skills can be incorporated into a child's total reading experience through listening and discussing long before the child masters decoding. Thus, even a child of three, four, or five can engage in a discussion both of what the author may have intended and also of his own feelings and ideas about the book.

By ages five to eight, children have

very strong ideas not only of what they think the author intends but also of whether or not the author succeeded in conveying that intent well; whether the author was sending mixed messages; and whether the child's own experience was compatible with, or differed from, the world view portrayed by the author.

The greatest challenges in leading discussions with children about the book they have just heard are to provide a very relaxed atmosphere where each child knows his comments are respected and valued; to keep the discussions open-ended; to let children know that there is no right answer, and that in responding each listener is in a dialogue with the author. Each child needs to know that whatever he gets from the book is important, and that through discussion and sharing of feelings and ideas he can get even more from it. At the same time the readaloud/discussion leader has the responsibility of putting onto the discussion agenda the themes, ideas and concepts that she considers important as well.

The following reviews illustrate ways we can stimulate critical thinking through discussions that follow reading aloud. Each review is composed of three parts: (1) the capsule review which includes a statement of the book's core meaning, (2) suggestions for ways to read the book aloud to thoroughly engage the listener, and (3) suggestions for ways the readaloud/discussion leader can stimulate thought by asking questions about the book's themes, characterizations etc., as well as the feelings the book might elicit.

In subsequent issues of *The Five Owls* we will discuss criteria for selecting good readalouds, how to encourage listener participation in the readaloud experience, establishing readaloud book groups in schools and libraries, and how to engage older students and parents to become able readaloud/discussion leaders so that younger children will have more sources of readaloud enrichment.

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