Books and Children—
An Open Letter from a Mother to Her Married Children

Dorothy Tower

This paper was commissioned as an extension of the original letter which its writer shared with me because of our common interest and points of view in the field of children’s books. With the paper came this comment: “You know, of course, that you gave me an impossible task. ‘Be sure to mention the names of books,’ you said. But you know that right there I am opening myself to all sorts of criticism, such as: ‘She didn’t tell us about any of the new books; she just mentioned the same old ones we knew about already.’ ‘But she didn’t mention Dr. Doolittle, or Hans Christian Andersen, or Make Way for Ducklings, or The Borrowers, or The Hobbit, or Robin Hood, or science, or biography, or ...’ So, I’m damned if I do and I’m damned if I don’t. It is one thing to write an introduction to a book list that I’ve been compiling for 30 years—with the book list there to look at; it is another to try to choose books that almost any child might like at one time or another, and to keep the whole at article, rather than book, length.”

Bibliographic information is not given here, for it can be had from any good children’s library or book on children’s literature; this is a point-of-view letter, with for-instance citations. May other readers enjoy it as much as I have, and may some of them be moved to write further on “the right book at the right time for the language therapy child.” People who want a single word for it sometimes call it “bibliotherapy.”

—Editor

Mes Enfants:

Now that each of you is enthusiastically embroiled in the joys and rigours of parenthood, I will risk volunteering some words of advice. No, I am not going to tell you how to bring up your children—that is your responsibility and privilege. However, I cannot resist the temptation to offer my opinions on what I consider to be the two necessary pieces of equipment in every home where there are small children: one bookcase per child, containing books; and at least one adult who is willing to read a few minutes daily to each child separately.

The bookcase can be an old wooden orange crate (if you can find one any more), or some wooden boards on concrete blocks. But it should be low enough for hands of a small one to capture and pull out his own books to look at and, in time, to read.

The adult can be either parent, but whoever is elected for the day
should want to take the time to read aloud with each child. If you are worried about dinner burning in the oven, or being late to a cocktail party, your child will sense your preoccupation, and neither of you will enjoy the story time; it will become just another chore. Those of you who are “ex-dyslexics” may feel that you are unable to read aloud without stumbling. Don’t worry, your child will not be as critical of your oral reading as you are; he will be more involved in the story and in the person reading it than in how it is read. (You might even become more fluent with practice!) But be sure your child has the experience of being read to by both parents—one parent ought not to have all the fun. Of course, when your child is old enough to choose the stories he wants to hear, you will have to have the patience of Job and the acting ability of Sir Laurence Olivier to be able to read even the delightful Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel, for example, for the seventeenth night in a row. Once you’ve introduced Mike, you could try to substitute a choice of your own, but it usually doesn’t work. Don’t despair; soon Mike will be displaced by some other storybook character, particularly if there are plenty of books available from which to choose. I learned early to try to foresee which books I could re-read with enthusiasm until you were ready to move on, or, when you chose them for later re-runs, which would be my welcome old friends, too. I enjoyed enjoying books with you and wanted to be able to do it whole-heartedly.

In your families, with your own children, in your homes, the challenge of diversion to television is markedly greater than was the case in our family when you yourselves were growing up. Without direct experience, therefore, I am not qualified to offer my two cents’ worth on how to balance these two oh-so-different forms of intellectual stimulus, each of which offers its own particular potential. With all due respect to the good television programs for children, however, being read to exclusively by a loving parent from a book of one’s own choice obviously is greater evidence of attention than is turning on the largest screen color television. Pulling out one’s own choice from one’s own orange crate bookshelf may offer broader scope for flights of imagination than the most thoughtful of TV programs.

All right, you have the bookcase, and you are willing to embark on one of the most rewarding and exciting experiences of parenthood; the bringing together of a child and a book. Which book? At what age should you start? When will your child be ready to listen? Let’s take the last question first. The other questions will follow from that.

Your child has been listening since he was born; he learned to distin-