

HOW TO CHOOSE CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Practical Tips and Philosophical
Reflections on Picking Books for Kids

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Children's Books and Reviews

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1. Children's Books. 2. Selecting Children's Books
3. Subjective Appeal. 4. Child Development.
5. Developmental Value. 6. Moral Development.

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DEDICATION

To Isabella and Olivia
with fatherly love.





“Socrates: You know, don’t you, that the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender? It’s at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it.

Adeimantus: Exactly.

Socrates: Then shall we carelessly allow the children to hear any old stories, told by just anyone, and to take beliefs into their souls that are for the most part opposite to the ones we think they should hold when they are grown up?”

The Republic (377a-b)



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Problem of Choosing Children's Books

It goes without saying that a child's engagement with good books is important and valuable to her development. Not only can reading good kids' books expand a child's cognitive abilities, but it can also spur a child's emotional, moral, and spiritual development. However, a quick visit to one of the big online or brick-and-mortar book retailers is enough to make you realize there are lots of children's books. Some of these books are good, but many are not. So, if you are looking to pick some children's books, you are left with a problem: "How do I choose good ones?"

In this book I hope to make some progress toward answering that question in a general way, such that after reading the book you will be more equipped to choose kids' books, even if you don't have access to reviews or recommendations. In short, I hope to explore some of the central criteria that one should use in evaluating and choosing children's books, and to impart some practical tips for choosing them. In keeping with **my philosophical proclivities**, I will season this exploration with philosophical reflection where appropriate.

1.2 Outline of the Book

The book has four main parts. In the first main part (**Chapter 2**), I will discuss the factors that make up what I call the subjective appeal of a children's book. In other words, I will try to explain the considerations that might make a book appealing to the key person we have in mind, namely the child that will engage with the book. Simply put, these are the reasons that the child will like the book. So, for example, in **Chapter 2** I will discuss things like humor and illustration quality. In addition to simply listing and explaining these considerations, I will begin by emphasizing the importance of considering subjective appeal when choosing children's books.

In the second main part (**Chapter 3**), I will take up the factors that can give a children's book developmental value. The factors I have in mind here are those that allow a book to contribute to a child's cognitive, emotional, moral, and spiritual development. The assumption here is that as an adult choosing a children's book you have some goals for your young reader that go beyond sheer delight (though this is important, as I will emphasize); presumably you will want the book to educate or spur growth in the child in some way, or at least not to detract from this process. In my lingo, books that educate or spur growth in this way have developmental value.

Moreover, you might think of a book with developmental value as possessing certain qualities that you hope your child will one day fully appreciate in a book, such as beautiful language, or creativity. Given this hope, you will want to choose books that exhibit these lofty qualities—even if the child doesn't fully appreciate them now—so that she can develop a taste for them. As a bonus, some of the considerations that make a book developmentally valuable will also make the book attractive to you as an adult, which will help you want to read it to the children in your life.

In the third main part (**Chapter 4**), I will briefly discuss an important

pitfall to avoid when choosing children's books, namely books that are overly commercialized. In the fourth and final main part of the book (**Chapter 5**), I will point out the value of "trusted opinions" in choosing kids' books. I'm thinking here of book lists and book reviews, where authoritative voices weigh in and help you decide which books to choose. As a blogger about children's books, I am quite partial to such blogs, and so I will also point out some of my favorite children's literature blogs, which are a fantastic source of recommendations and reviews.

A short "**About the Author**" section is also included at the very end of the book.

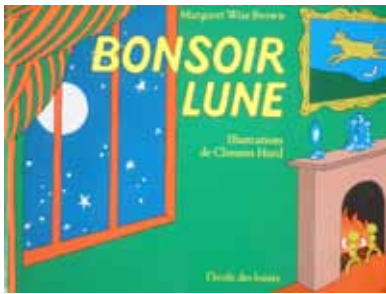
CHAPTER 2 SUBJECTIVE APPEAL

In **Chapter 1** I introduced the notion of a book’s “subjective appeal,” i.e., the considerations that might make a book appealing to a child. In **Chapter 2** I will explain what subjective appeal is in more depth by pointing out some of the central qualities that can give a children’s book subjective appeal, such as attractive themes, illustrations, and humor. However, before stepping through these qualities, I will argue for the importance of considering subjective appeal when choosing children’s books.

2.1 The Importance of Subjective Appeal

So, here is the central—and what I take to be very important—point of this section: choosing a kids’ book with subjective appeal is not optional. Rather, it is a crucial, non-negotiable part of the selection.

Now, this might go without saying for most of us: of course we aim to choose children’s books that kids will like! However, this is not obvious to everyone. I have in mind here a certain kind of parent or caretaker that tends toward the “all business” approach to child education and development. This kind of adult might tend, at least sometimes, to read a book to a child because it is good for the child, regardless of the fact that the child would rather not be reading it.



I know that adults with this tendency are out there because I sometimes exhibit it myself! For example, my wife and I are trying to help our children learn French from a young age. Part of the way we encourage French language learning is by reading French language children's books to them, such as a French translation of *Goodnight Moon*, by Margaret Wise Brown, called *Bonsoir Lune*. My kids enjoy this to a certain extent, but they get tired of it pretty quickly, and when they do I sometimes turn into a dictator, pushing them to attend to a book that they're not enjoying.

However, this kind of practice—where we neglect what is enjoyable to a child—can have disastrous effects. First of all, it tends to erode the child's desire to be read to. (My children are definitely less inclined to go back to the French language books after an episode like that.) That fact is, of course, terrible given all the amazing relational and emotional (not to mention cognitive) benefits that derive simply from an adult sitting down and reading a book to a child.

However, as if that were not bad enough, forcing a child to bear with a kids' book she doesn't like also erodes her desire to read at all. In other words, such a practice may well contribute to turning the child off of reading altogether. Indeed, I suspect that many kids who don't really enjoy reading have simply not been exposed to the right kind of books, i.e., books that are interesting to them. Keeping in mind that what we want to cultivate in a child is a love of being read to, and a lifelong love of reading in general, it will be crucial to choose children's books that a child will enjoy reading, i.e., books with subjective appeal. After all, do you consistently read things you find boring or unappealing?

However, there is one caveat to my emphasis on the importance of considering subjective appeal when choosing children's books: simply choosing a book that a child will like is also not enough. Why? Because sometimes children like books that are not so good for them (so do

adults!). As I noted in [Chapter 1](#), we, as adults, have certain developmental goals in mind for the children in our lives, so we also need to consider those goals when choosing children’s books. In other words, we also need to consider a book’s developmental value when evaluating it. (I’ll say more about that in [Chapter 3](#).)

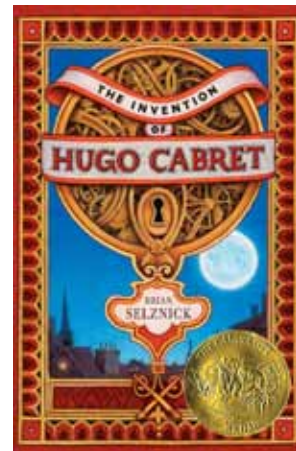
So, given a child’s proclivity for certain forms of junky books, and given that we have certain developmental goals in mind for our children, that a book has subjective appeal for a child should not be enough to seal your choice, but it is a crucial start since it encourages a love of reading. Plus it is just plain great to see a child enjoying something!

Now let’s turn to some of the particular qualities that might give a book subjective appeal for a child.

2.2 Attractive Themes

In this section I will discuss the role of a book’s themes in rendering it appealing to a child, and I will try to give some specific age appropriate guidance on what to look for in children’s book themes.

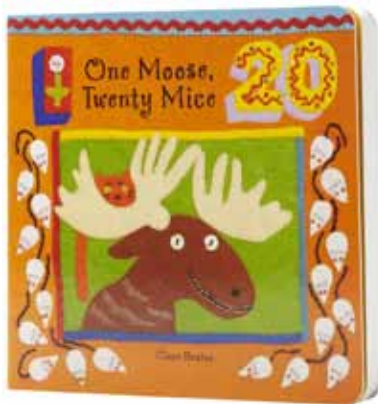
What do I mean by the “themes” of a children’s book? I mean the specific content of the book, or what the children’s book is about. For example, in a science book about snakes, the theme might simply be snakes. Or, in a book like [The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#) ([click for review](#)), by Brian Selznick, the themes might include coping with loss, or finding one’s purpose in the world. In a picture book like [Martin’s Big Words](#) ([click for review](#)), the themes might include justice, equality, and love.



The key to choosing a book with appealing themes is to look for themes that directly relate to the experience of the child.

Age Appropriate Themes

Some aspects of a child’s experience will be shared with most every other child of her age or developmental level. For example, most every child in the infant-to-two-years category is acquiring basic language and concepts, is learning to control her body in various basic ways, and is coming to recognize some of the objects in the world. Given that most every infant-to-2-year-old shares experiences of this kind, kids’ books with themes that directly connect with these experiences will be thematically age appropriate.



Thus, for the infant-to-two-years category, age appropriate themes might include animals and numbers (e.g., [One Moose, Twenty Mice](#)), the alphabet (e.g., [Dr. Seuss’s ABC: An Amazing Alphabet Book!](#)), making noise (e.g., [Clap Hands \[click for review\]](#)), pets (e.g., [Follow Carl!](#)), potty training (e.g., [Once Upon a Potty](#)), and bedtime (e.g., [Grandfather Twilight \[click for review\]](#)).

Children in the three-to-five-years age category are learning to do more things for themselves, continuing to gain more understanding of how the world works, working on mastery of their impulses and emotions, beginning to navigate relationships with parents, siblings, and friends, and they are beginning to acquire basic values. Thus, age appropriate themes might include doing things “by myself” (e.g., [Hey, Little Baby!](#)), going to the zoo (e.g., [When We Went to the Zoo](#)), getting angry (e.g., [When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry...](#)), or friendship (e.g., [Frog and Toad Are Friends](#)).

Age appropriate themes for children in the six-to-eight-years category might include relationships at school (e.g., [Chrysanthemum](#)), pets (e.g., [Comet’s Nine Lives](#)), moral character (e.g., [Once a Mouse...](#)), and family relationships (e.g., [Sylvester and the Magic Pebble](#)).

Age appropriate themes for children in the nine-to-twelve-years category might include friendships (e.g., 2010 Newbery Medal winner [When You Reach Me](#) [[click for review](#)]), conflicts between good and evil (e.g., [Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's/Philosopher's Stone](#)), and finding one's place in the world (e.g., [The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#)). These examples of age-appropriate themes are just a start and should not be taken as exhaustive.

Choosing Themes by Interest

Finally, while age appropriate themes will likely connect with any child in a given age or developmental category, there will also be certain themes that appeal to the particular child you have in mind simply because of her specific interests.

For example, my eldest daughter has always been fascinated by science, and especially the science of living things. When she was five or so her aunt gave her a kids' book on plant function and anatomy, and she devoured it. She still tells me about "stomata" and "pistils" years later! In my initial estimation, this sort of book would have been dead boring for a five-year-old (and it would be boring for many five-year-olds). But, for my little scientist, it was fascinating because she had a special interest in the theme of the book.

The bottom-line is this: when choosing a book for a child, consider the themes of the book and whether they connect with the current life experiences of the child, given his age and special interests. Themes of this sort will contribute to making the book appealing to him. In fact, sometimes an interesting theme alone is enough to make a book appealing to a child.

2.3 Illustrations

Illustrations can also make an important contribution to the appeal of

children's books. In this section I will discuss how illustrations make books appealing to children, and I will try to give some guidance on what sort of illustrations to look for. However, I should say up front that there is a lot of room for difference of opinion over what makes for attractive illustrations in children's books, so take my guidance as applying only "for the most part"; there will be many exceptions to it, due to a certain amount of subjectivity inherent to aesthetic judgments.

Illustrations and Subjective Appeal

The most important point here is that the illustrations in a children's book are perhaps the largest part of what makes the book attractive to kids, especially for children younger than eight years old.



In fact, recently when I was re-reading *Hi, Cat!*, in preparation for writing a special article on the work of Ezra Jack Keats, the images of mint green ice cream on Archie's dark face, and of Peter's dog Willie licking the ice cream off, jumped out as vivid memories from my own childhood. My parents had read this kids' book to me when I was little and I still remember the images over 30 years later! I've had similar experiences while reading Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* to my children.

The point is that attractive illustrations are almost always what focuses a young child's interest and attention on a book—often in surprisingly enduring ways! Without strong illustrations young children may well lose interest in a kids' book, even if the narrative is great.

What Makes for Good Illustrations

In my view, there is no deep mystery to choosing illustrations with kid-appeal: in general, if you think the illustrations are attractive and interesting to look at, so will a child. For example, both children and adults

revel in Jerry Pinkney's delicious illustrations in the 2010 Caldecott Medal winner [The Lion & the Mouse](#) ([click for review](#)).



However, there will be some exceptions. For example, many children will not enjoy illustrations that are particularly dark, scary, or abstract, so if you are an adult with such aesthetic tastes, you should keep this difference of taste in mind when choosing children's books.

Like the themes of children's books, illustrations with content that connects with the experience and interests of the child will be more likely to make a book appealing to a child. This criterion will not be hard to meet, however, since if you find a kids' book with appropriate themes, the content of the illustrations will likely be on topic anyway.

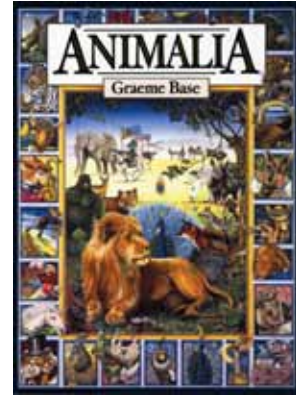
Finally, a book's illustrations should be integrated well with the text of the book, whether fiction or non-fiction. The illustrations should complement and extend beyond the text, filling out the book in ways that words cannot.

Illustrations By Age Group

Children in the infant-to-2-years age category will likely respond better to simpler and more concrete illustrations than to illustrations that are highly complicated or fanciful. Bold colors that catch the eye are also often especially attractive to toddlers. Helen Oxenbury's [Clap Hands](#) ([click for review](#)) is a children's book with illustrations that embody these characteristics of simplicity, concreteness, and bold colors, and so it is an especially good example of illustrations appropriate for toddlers. At best, illustrations with a lot of complexity and wild imagery will be lost on a toddler; at worst such illustrations might cause her to lose interest in the book.

However, slightly older children—in the 3-to-5- and 6-to-8-years age

categories—respond very well to complex, detailed, and more fanciful illustrations. For example, my children (who are now six and eight years old) love Graeme Base’s kids’ books largely because of the intricate, detailed illustrations. In [Animalia](#) Base packs his amazing illustrations with objects and details that my kids love to hunt for; on a few occasions we have spent hours at a time combing through his beautiful, detailed artwork. In this case, the rich, complicated detail of the illustrations is not extraneous, but rather is the central focus of the book.



Finally, while illustrations become less important as children get older—e.g., a good story alone might well hold children older than nine years—illustrations can still help to tell a story, or illumine the content of a book for an older child. Brian Selznick’s [The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#) ([click for review](#)), is an example of a children’s book for 9-to-12-year-olds that makes tremendously effective use of illustrations. Half novel, half silent movie, there are stretches of the book where Selznick uses only haunting black and white illustrations to recount the gripping tale. The resulting effect is enchanting.

2.4 Stories

Next, I will discuss the place of a story in rendering books appealing to children, and what to look for in a good kids’ story.

Now, it will soon be clear that I am a big fan of good stories in children’s books. However, it is important to emphasize that not every subjectively appealing children’s book must have a story. For example, a good ABC book might simply march through the ABCs without a story at all. However, if a children’s book does not have a story, adults need to make sure the book is appealing to the child in other ways (e.g., via themes, illustrations, humor, etc.).

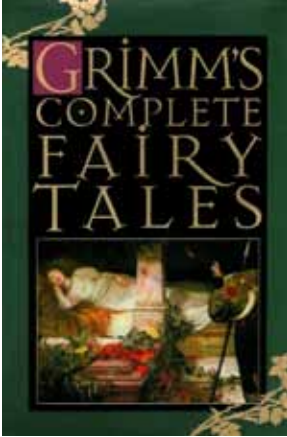
Anatomy of a Good Story

There are, of course, a few components that are common to all good stories, kids' stories included. To boil it down to the painfully obvious, a good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end (revelatory, right?). The beginning introduces and develops the main characters of the story. The middle generally introduces some sort of problem, and the end brings some sort of resolution to the problem. As I will discuss below, this pattern can be slightly different in books for very young children, mainly because most toddlers cannot yet conceptualize problems and solutions. Nevertheless, there is still something like this pattern in play, even for good toddler stories (as I will explain).

A good story can be part of the subjective appeal of most any good kids' book. Now, of course I am primarily referring to fictional children's books here. However, I would argue that the point holds even for many works of children's non-fiction. For example, I think the success of books like the [Magic Tree House series](#), and [The Magic School Bus series](#)—books with clear non-fiction educational ambitions—is largely due to the fact that they employ stories in communicating historical and scientific knowledge. My kids have loved learning about (e.g.) ancient Egypt and the hydrologic cycle through the adventurous stories in these books. The picture book [Martin's Big Words](#) ([click for review](#)), is a further example of a non-fiction book that fruitfully employs story.

How Good Stories Work

Why do good stories make kids' books appealing? In short, because they engage a child's affect, or feelings, in appropriate ways. Children identify with and like the characters in the story, they feel anxiety at the problem—as if they themselves were part of the story—and they equally feel relief and satisfaction when the problem is resolved. This affective involvement in the story draws the child into the book, holding her interest. After all, it is hard to be bored when your emotions are engaged!



Now, I said a good story engages a child's affect in appropriate ways. Obviously, there will be differences of parental opinion over what constitutes appropriate affective engagement. I'm thinking particularly of the use of fear in stories. Historically, children's stories have often been quite terrifying (e.g., [Grimm's Fairy Tales](#)). In contemporary times, children's stories have generally moved away from such explicit use of fear. Since one of my children tends to be very sensitive (e.g., unable to sit through the movie "Toy Story" at age seven; yes, the horrors of Pixar movies...), we don't generally read very scary stuff. However, the use of fear in children's stories is an issue parents should weigh carefully for themselves.

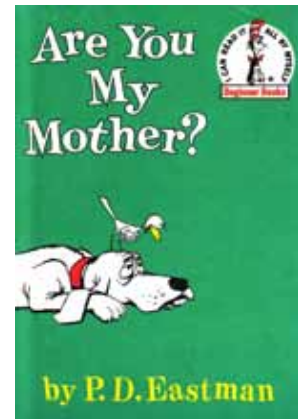
Incidentally, the affective engagement provoked by a good story is also a great help in learning. When a child's emotions are active in the right way, her mind is much more focused and attentive to the activating content. For this reason, children's books with good stories can also be extremely valuable to the development of a child on cognitive, moral, and spiritual levels. Borrowing a term from [Charlotte Mason](#), I like to call books that productively engage a child's affect in this way, "living books". I will explore the developmental value of good stories further in [Chapter 3](#).

Age Appropriate Criteria for Evaluating Stories

For children in the infant-to-two-years age category, stories are less important to the subjective appeal of a kids' book. Indeed, most kids in this category would not really engage with the components of a good story (especially the problem and its solution) since they are still acquiring basic language and concepts. So, it is not crucial for toddler stories to have a middle section with a problem and an end with a clear solution. Nevertheless, children at this age still appreciate the characters in a book, they still want to see those characters engaged in some sort of activity, and they still appreciate a sense of completion at the end.

For example, in [Grandfather Twilight](#) by Barbara Berger ([click for review](#)) we begin by meeting Grandfather Twilight and his pets. The middle of the story has these characters going down to the water and magically putting the moon in the sky, and the story ends with everyone going to bed. This sort of cycle still brings a sense of completion and satisfaction for the toddler, even though it does not have an actual problem and resolution.

For children in the three-to-five- and six-to-eight-years categories, a good story will generally have the more paradigmatic structure. For example, in the classic early reader [Are You My Mother?](#) by P.D. Eastman ([click for review](#)), the story begins by introducing the mother and baby birds, and it progresses by raising the problem of where the baby bird's mother is. The problem is heightened by the baby bird's encounter with a seemingly dangerous "Snort". The



problem is resolved when the Snort puts the baby back in his nest, and he is reunited with his mother. The story also makes great use of repetition, which helps children anticipate what is coming, and is thereby an effective story-telling tool for kids in these age categories. At this age, stories cannot be too complex or employ too much logic or children will simply be lost.

For children of nine years and older, adults should look for stories with the same paradigmatic structure, but with increasing complexity in all parts. For this age group, a story's beginning should employ increasingly complex character development. For example, the beginning of [The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#) is almost entirely driven by the masterful development of the book's central character, Hugo Cabret. Hugo is somewhat mysterious, and the reader wants to find out who he is.

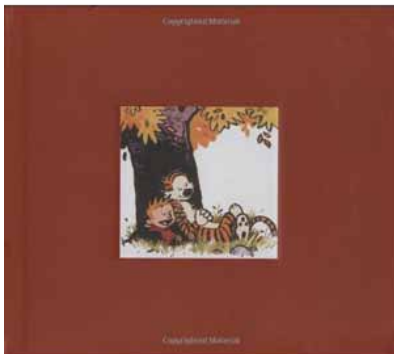
For older kids the problem introduced in the middle can also be more complex. For example, in 2010 Newbery Medal winner [When You Reach Me](#) by Rebecca Stead ([click for review](#)), there are several problems

introduced: Who is sending the mysterious notes to Miranda? Why is Sal suddenly cold toward her? Why did Marcus hit Sal? Who is the crazy man on the corner? Such questions set problems for the reader in Rebecca Stead's compelling children's mystery.

Resolution at the end of the story can also be more complex for older children. For example, in the **Harry Potter series** many smaller problems are resolved on the way to the ultimate resolution in the final book, **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows**. Indeed, smaller problems are resolved throughout each book in the series, each book itself ends with the resolution of a somewhat larger problem, and the series as a whole brings resolution to the ultimate problem it presents: the conflict between good and evil. This pattern typifies the genre of saga. For older kids, the problems and their resolution can involve much deductive logic and subtlety.

2.5 Humor

In this section I will discuss the role of humor in rendering kids' books appealing, and I will give some suggestions for how to choose funny children's books.



My eldest daughter, Isabella, loves funny books. In particular, she thinks the Calvin and Hobbes comic strip is hilarious. In second grade her teacher had a small classroom library of books that the kids could take home for a few days at a time. The definitive three-volume collection of Calvin and Hobbes, **The Complete Calvin and Hobbes**, was Isabella's favorite item in that library. Whenever she had one of the volumes at home, it was hard even to communicate with her, let alone get her to do basic things like eat, sleep, or go to the bathroom in a timely manner. When we did succeed in prying her away from the

book, she would usually pass the “time apart” by incessantly recounting strips that she had memorized to whomever would listen (and sometimes to people who wouldn’t...). Isabella now owns the three-volume set (thanks Grandma!) and no matter the topic of conversation, she can usually quote a relevant Calvin and Hobbes strip.

Needless to say, Isabella’s love of Calvin and Hobbes is an object lesson in how powerful humor can be in drawing children to books. Kids love to laugh, so kids’ books that make them laugh are almost automatically appealing to them. On the whole, this is just as it should be. When looking for children’s books, finding funny ones should be a priority. Cosmo Brown (Donald O’Connor)—Don Lockwood’s (Gene Kelly) side-kick in “Singin’ in the Rain”—had it right: “[Make ‘em laugh!](#)”

A Cautionary Word About Humor

However, this general embrace of funny children’s books should have at least a hint of caution in it. The problem is, it is sadly common for children’s books to encourage kids to laugh at the wrong kinds of things.

For example, some children’s authors have kids laughing at ethical transgressions such as stealing, and at extremely negative adversarial relationships between children and adults. I think this—along with standard potty humor—is the stock and trade of Dav Pilkey’s [Captain Underpants series](#), as I have pointed out in my relatively [negative review of The Adventures of Captain Underpants](#).

In my view, the [Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#) books are in this same vein. Author Jeff Kinney has kids laughing at the mean, self-centered actions and attitudes of the protagonist Greg Heffley ([click for review](#)).

The trouble with provoking kids to laugh at bad actions, attitudes, and relationships, is that it sets up a pattern whereby they take a certain pleasure in these things (or at least in observing them), which, given enough time, begins to wear the wrong kinds of grooves in their character. In other words, when our children consistently take pleasure in bad

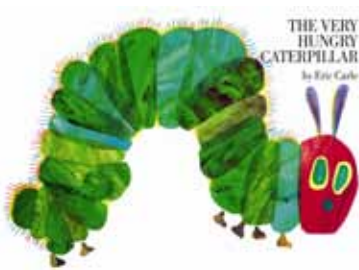
actions, attitudes, and relationships, such patterns of activity are reinforced in their character.

While some may disagree with my examples of humorous books to avoid, surely the link between character and what we take pleasure in is a time-honored one. I will discuss it further in [Chapter 3](#).

Now, in some cases it is difficult to distinguish between harmless funny mischief in a children's book, and character-damaging humor. In fact, as a parent I have wrestled a bit with Isabella's love of Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin is very mischievous and self-centered at times, and we certainly don't want his consistently aggravating, disobedient behavior finding its way into our daughter's character. For this reason we have limited her time with Calvin to brief periods on weekends (compromise, pick your battles, etc.). However, I still think there are clear cases of genuinely funny kids' books that parents should avoid altogether—[The Adventures Of Captain Underpants](#) and [Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#) among them.

Age Appropriate Humor

I will now turn to a discussion of some examples of children's books that avoid the problems I have cautioned against, and yet remain very funny and appealing for kids. Although it is difficult to analyze humor, I will try to draw out what makes the books funny with the aim of highlighting some general characteristics to look for in funny kids' books. I will do this for various age categories.



For children in the infant-to-two-years age category, humor in children's books must be very basic and straightforward. (Remember that a lot of humor is really quite complex, and thus flies over the head of most young children.)

For example, when they were young my kids giggled when [The Very Hungry Caterpillar](#) ([click for review](#)) ate his way through “one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle,

one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon”, and ended up with a stomachache. What makes this funny is the absurd thought that a caterpillar would eat things like lollipops and cherry pie, and in quantities that even a human would have trouble with!

Another funny book for infant-to-two-year-olds (and for adults reading it to them!) is Helen Oxenbury’s [Clap Hands](#) ([click for review](#)). Here it just seems to be babies doing baby things—wearing droopy diapers, having funny looks on their faces, pouring juice on their friends, etc.—that makes the book funny (parents have known about this source of humor since time began!). Kids who have outgrown the phase where they do such things—but perhaps only just!—can look on such activity from their new position of relative mastery and see the cute humor in it.

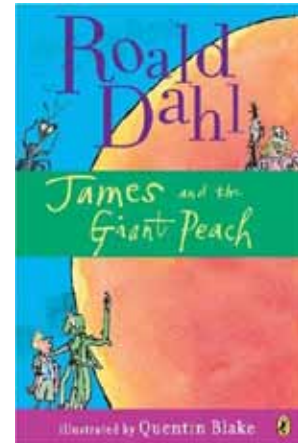
For children in the three-to-five-years age category, the [Frog and Toad series](#) is a natural example of funny appealing kids’ books. One thing that makes these books funny is Toad’s eccentricity. For example, in [Frog and Toad Together](#), Toad wakes up one day and decides he will make a list of tasks to do that day, and cross each off the list as he accomplishes it. However, after accomplishing a few of the tasks, Toad’s list blows away in the wind. Frog suggests that they run after the list and try to catch it, but Toad frets that running after his list was not on his list of things to do, and so he can’t do it! Toad then forgets what else was on his list and becomes paralyzed, since he no longer knows what to do.

At this point in the story, my kids are giggling. The main driver of the humor here, of course, is Toad’s absurd eccentricity (which also shows up in many other stories in the books). However, while we think Toad is silly, we are not laughing cruelly at him, i.e., we are not making fun of him. This is mostly because his faithful friend Frog (who is generally more sensible than Toad) embraces him despite his eccentricity, and thus we do too.

Roald Dahl is a master of funny books for children in the six-to-eight-

years age category. In many of Dahl's books, the humor derives from wicked people getting their due in creatively strange ways.

For example, in *James and the Giant Peach*, James's mean Aunts Sponge and Spiker get their comeuppance when the giant peach that has grown in their yard breaks free of its mooring and rolls over them, squishing them flat. Later, the Centipede sings a wild funny limerick about the aunts and their death (sample verse: "Aunt Spiker was thin as a wire, And dry as a bone, only drier. She was so long and thin, If you carried her in, You could use her for poking the fire!"). Now, considered literally, this happening is of course a bit gruesome (another consistent feature of Dahl's children's books, and something they share with classics like *Grimm's Fairy Tales*), but the absurd way it transpires—coupled with the Centipede's wild poem—make the whole thing funny, in a "dark comedy" kind of way.



For children of nine years and older, character-driven and plot-driven absurdity continue to be excellent sources of humor. However, for this older age group even simple uses of language can be funny. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, J.K. Rowling humorously describes Ron's rude Aunt Muriel in the following way: "...Ron reappeared with an elderly witch clutching his arm. Her beaky nose, red-rimmed eyes, and feathery pink hat gave her the look of a bad-tempered flamingo" (p.141). Even a simple description like this can yield a chuckle and help render a book appealing to a child.

CHAPTER 3 DEVELOPMENTAL VALUE

As I have already mentioned, the second general criterion (in addition to subjective appeal) that should guide adults in choosing kids' books is "developmental value." A children's book has developmental value if it has qualities that allow the book to contribute to a child's cognitive, emotional, moral, or even spiritual development. In Chapter 3 I will unpack what I take to be the most important of these developmentally valuable qualities. However, before doing that, I want to emphasize the importance of considering developmental value when choosing children's books.

3.1 The Importance of Developmental Value

Presumably, an adult that cares about a child—e.g., a parent, a grandparent, an aunt, a teacher, etc.—has certain goals (or at least hopes) for the child. At a minimum the adult likely wants the child to learn to read. However, she might also want the child to gain knowledge of the world, to understand herself better, to develop reasoning skills, to learn to manage her emotions, to appreciate beauty, to learn to make good choices, and generally to become a good human being.

In my view, children's books have the potential to contribute to each of these kinds of development. Most obviously, a child will not learn to read well unless she gets some practice, and reading children's books with

an adult is the best way for a child to start practicing. Indeed, **empirical studies** have shown that parental reading to preschoolers is strongly correlated with literacy and language acquisition in children.

Similarly, children's books open the opportunity for kids to gain valuable knowledge. For example, even a simple board book like **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** ([click for review](#)) introduces kids to numbers, days of the week, and the life-cycle of a caterpillar. Moreover, complex mysteries can encourage a child's deductive reasoning abilities, while good characters can function as moral and emotional exemplars.

While I could multiply examples here (and I will in subsequent sections), suffice it to say that children's books represent an incredible opportunity for growth and development in a child. For this reason, it is important for adults to try to choose children's books with qualities that will facilitate the kinds of development I have mentioned.

On the flip side, children's books can also be detrimental to certain goals that an adult might have for the child in her life. For example, **just like television**, books that glamorize certain forms of misbehavior might well encourage the wrong sort of behavior and character in children. Thus, if a children's book lacks developmental value, not only might the book represent a lost opportunity for growth, but it might also represent a backward step in the child's development. In other words, such a book might well leave a child worse off (albeit incrementally so). Thus, this potential harm is another reason for adults to pay attention to developmental value when choosing children's books.

Now, a book need not exhibit all of the characteristics that might make it developmentally valuable for it to be worth reading; however, I usually look for at least one of them in any children's book I choose. In some

cases I might still choose a book that has lots of subjective appeal (i.e., one the child will like a lot) but that is relatively neutral with respect to developmental value, as long as the book does not detract from a child's development.

I will turn, now, to an explanation of some of the specific ways in which children's books can provoke development in children. I will begin with perhaps the most obvious way books can influence child development, namely by influencing cognitive development via the language and content of the book. After these topics, I will discuss the influence books can have on the development of a child's moral and aesthetic sense.

3.2 Language Development

Children's books have great potential to support language development. In this section I will explain what I call "edifying language," i.e., language that contributes in some way to a child's development, and how it does this. I will also try to give some guidance on choosing children's books that support language development.

Basic Language Acquisition

Children's books can be an essential help to a child in learning her native language. Depending on how much a child is read to—and I hope the kids in your life are read to a lot!—children's books can be a central example of how the language works, i.e., how sentences are structured, what the basic rules of grammar and syntax are, and what particular words mean.

Therefore, for children of all ages, edifying language will amount, in part, to language with proper grammar and sentence structure (unless poetic license is clearly in view). Children's books that exhibit proper grammar and sentence structure will help kids to internalize these features of the language. While this grammatical criterion might seem

trivial, and something that any published children's book would satisfy, this is not always the case. For example, I was recently sent a published book for review—*The Wild Soccer Bunch, Book 1, Kevin the Star Striker*—that consistently flouts proper grammar. Whatever other merits the book might have, proper grammar is a non-negotiable for me, so I didn't even finish reading it, let alone review it: books like that can generate bad grammatical habits in children, inhibiting their language proficiency.

Vocabulary Expansion

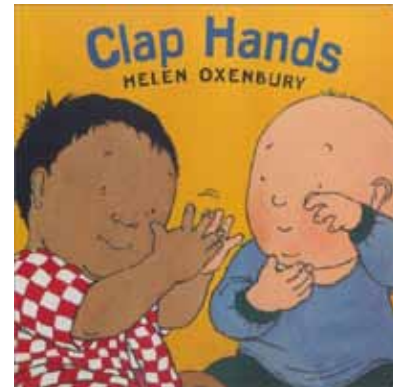
Edifying language can also contribute to the expansion of a child's vocabulary in an organic and motivating way. While flash-card memorization of word definitions may have its place at some stages of vocabulary expansion (e.g., when cramming for a standardized test such as the SAT or GRE), in my view this approach is artificial and generally ineffective over the long-term.

A better approach is for a child (or adult!) to learn the meaning of words as she encounters them in the context of good books or other media, either by asking someone who knows the meaning, or by looking up the words in a dictionary. Vocabulary learned in this organic, contextual way tends to "stick" better, since the child is motivated to understand what she is reading, and thus she cares about what the puzzling words mean.

My 8-year-old daughter is a case in point: she is constantly asking me what words mean as she reads books, and once she hears my explanation (or once we've looked them up in the dictionary!), she tends to retain the meaning with uncanny regularity. Months later she will use what seems to me a very big word, I'll ask her where she learned it, and she'll tell me what book it was from and that I had been the one who taught it to her! Moral: words learned in isolation are boring; words learned in context are illuminating and interesting.

The way I have put this point about vocabulary expansion suggests that I primarily have in mind older children, i.e., children that can understand an adult's explanation of meaning, or that can look up a word in the dictionary. However, my point also holds for very young children. For example, the language of a board book can contribute to a toddler's process of acquiring basic vocabulary by connecting clear illustrations of objects with the words that signify them.

Helen Oxenbury's [Clap Hands](#) ([click for review](#)) is a nice example of a board book with language that edifies in this way. She uses simple words signifying concrete objects and activities that very young children can relate to—e.g., 'clap', 'hands', 'open', 'bang', 'drum', 'daddy', 'mum', etc. Coupled with Oxenbury's bright clear illustrations and some help from an adult, such simple language soon becomes part of a toddler's repertoire.



Edifying Language and Literacy

Edifying language can also help a child learn to read. I'm thinking especially of language pitched at just the right level for new readers. The famous "[Beginner Books](#)" [picture book series](#) is a good example here (think [The Cat in the Hat](#) and [Are You My Mother?](#)). The authors of these books are required to write their stories using only a constrained set of fewer than 400 words that are simple but crucial building blocks in a child's reading vocabulary. These are words that are both used frequently, and that are relatively simple to figure out phonetically. Such edifying language supports a child's journey toward literacy. Moreover, once a child is reading on his own, edifying language is the vehicle by which his reading skills continue to develop.

If language is to support literacy in this way, it is important that it not aim too high or too low relative to a child's abilities. Ideally, language in chil-

dren's books should challenge a child somewhat, even for books that are primarily read to the child by an adult. Thus, the level of vocabulary and linguistic complexity should be slightly above the child's current ability, to encourage growth. However, if the language of a book is way over a child's head, the book will likely be frustrating or boring for him, so it is important not to overshoot. If you do overshoot, you can always try the book later.

3.3 Educational Themes

Perhaps the most obvious way a children's book can have developmental value for a child is by its ability to educate about a certain topic. As the child reads the book, she learns something via the content of the book. In this section I will discuss the place of educational themes in rendering a children's book developmentally valuable, and I will offer some advice on choosing children's educational books. This discussion of educational themes might be understood as a complement to the Chapter 2 discussion of attractive themes, which contribute to the subjective appeal of a children's book.

Themes and Developmental Stage

There is no mystery to how educational books can contribute to a child's development: books with educational themes simply help a child learn something she didn't know before. The key, then, to choosing children's books with educational themes is to make sure the themes of the book fit with the child's stage of cognitive, physical, and emotional development.

Happily, there is a lot of overlap between themes that are valuable to kids at a certain developmental stage and themes that are appealing to them. For example, as noted in [Chapter 2](#), children in the infants and toddlers age category (roughly up to three years old) are generally learning basic concepts, acquiring language, learning to recognize objects in the world, and learning to control their bodies in basic ways. So, books

featuring letters (e.g., [Dr. Seuss's ABC: An Amazing Alphabet Book!](#)), colors, and numbers are obviously appropriate and beneficial. One reason Eric Carle's classic book, [The Very Hungry Caterpillar](#) ([click for review](#)), is so good is that it exposes children to numbers, the biology of caterpillars and butterflies, and to basic objects (e.g., the sun, leaves, food items, etc.). These elements are educational for young children. Potty training (e.g., [Once Upon a Potty](#)) is another example of a theme that would be educational, and so developmentally valuable, for very young children.

For a more comprehensive sketch of themes that might be both educational and appealing to children in various age categories, I refer you back to [the section on attractive themes in Chapter 2](#).

Educational Themes and Fiction



Notice that any of the themes I have mentioned above and in [Chapter 2](#) might be found in fiction or non-fiction children's books. It is obvious that non-fiction books can be educational in this way: they are often singly focused on educating a reader about something—e.g., a period of history, the culture of a certain country, or an archeological discovery. However, fiction can also educate. For example, [Theodosia and the Serpents of Chaos](#), by R.L. LaFevre (and the Theodosia series in general) wraps a certain amount of history (both ancient and modern), culture (Egyptian and British), and archeology into an interesting story. Other examples include the [Magic Tree House series](#), and [The Magic School Bus series](#) (as I noted previously), which use fiction to educate about history and science, respectively. Indeed, educational themes wrapped in a fictional package can make learning very attractive to children, since we all love a good story.

This last point about fiction and educational themes suggests something very important about choosing educational books: a book must also be

interesting to the child. If the child is not interested in reading it, or having it read to her, then no matter what the themes are, the book will not be developmentally valuable. She has to read the book if she is going to learn anything! So, as I noted in [Chapter 2](#), it is very important to choose books with themes that are not only developmentally appropriate, but also interesting to the child.

3.4 Story Complexity



Another characteristic that can affect the developmental value of a kids' book is the complexity of the book's story. In this section I will explain what I mean by "story complexity," and what I see as the connection between the complexity of children's stories and certain kinds of cognitive development. I will draw on prominent examples of recent middle-grade and young adult fiction to illustrate my points: J.K. Rowling's [Harry Potter series](#), and Rebecca Stead's 2010 Newbery Medal winner [When You Reach Me](#) ([click for review](#)). While what I have to say will apply mostly to older children, I will also try to give some guidance on choosing complex stories for younger children.

Complex Characters

Viewed one way, the basic elements of a story are characters and plots. Both of these elements may contribute to the complexity of a story. First, I will discuss how the characters in a story may contribute to its complexity. A complex character is one whose mental, emotional, and behavioral activity is developed by the author to such a degree that it seems deeply true to life.

J.K. Rowling is a master of this sort of character development, so I will use Neville Longbottom—one of Harry's friends in the [Harry Potter](#)

series—as an example of a complex character in a children’s novel. In the beginning of the Harry Potter series, Neville is introduced as a well-meaning but bumbling pre-teen who lacks confidence. We later learn that his lack of confidence is partially a function of pressure he feels to live up to the high standard of courage and self-sacrifice that his parents set in their fight against Lord Voldemort and his minions. Neville is constantly losing his pet frog Trevor, botching an assignment in potions class, or forgetting the password to the Gryffindor common room.

However, early on we also discover that Neville has an aptitude for herbology (the study of magical plants), which ends up being quite useful to Harry in **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire** (**Gillyweed**, anyone?), and that Neville has the makings of courage: recall his feeble but brave attempt to stop Harry, Ron, and Hermione from sneaking out at night to safeguard the Sorcerer’s Stone in **Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone**.

As the series progresses, Neville’s character grows up. He becomes an increasingly brave and competent help in the fight against Voldemort, gradually emerging from the long shadow cast by his heroic parents. By the end of the series—in **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows**—Neville has become the ringleader of the student resistance movement at Hogwarts, which is now controlled by Voldemort’s forces. Not only does he endure severe and unjust punishments in his resistance to evil, but he ends up killing Voldemort’s precious snake Nagini—the last of Voldemort’s life-preserving horcruxes. In the Epilogue to the series we learn that Neville has become the herbology professor at Hogwarts.

My point in this sketch of Neville Longbottom is that J.K. Rowling has created in Neville a multi-faceted complex character that pops from the pages of her novels. Neville’s emotional life is not merely one-dimensional, but rather reflects a dynamic redemptive journey from insecurity and halting bravery, to confidence and full-blown courage. Moreover, Rowling’s sketch of Neville’s family history shows us why he feels the way he does at the various points in the story. We see and understand Neville’s journey from bungler to professor, and how it is connected with

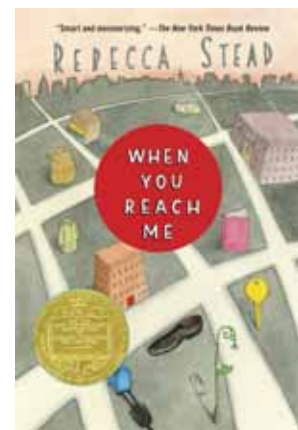
his emotional life.

Indeed, it is a marvel of Rowling's series that she develops even secondary characters like Neville Longbottom to such an extent. Our depth of insight into the central protagonists, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and even into the villain, Voldemort, of course exceeds that available for secondary characters like Neville.

Character complexity like this contributes to child development. Specifically, it can help children see connections between a character's personal history, thoughts, emotions, and behavior, which in turn can help them make such connections in their own life. Indeed, I think this is one of the central ways that fiction communicates truth: by making sense of realistically complex characters, fiction helps us make sense of our own lives. Making sense of our lives in this way amounts to a kind of cognitive (and perhaps emotional) development. This is of course true of all good fiction (including adult fiction), but the generality of this point makes it no less true and important of children's books.

Complex Plots

Second, a complex plot may contribute to the complexity of a kids' story. To explain the elements of a complex plot I will use Rebecca Stead's recent Newbery Medal-winning novel [When You Reach Me](#) ([click for review](#)).



A complex plot generally leaves the reader with some mystery or puzzle to solve over the course of the book. For example, in *When You Reach Me* the reader is confronted immediately with the mysterious notes that the protagonist, Miranda, has been receiving. Who is sending these notes? What do they mean? Is the sender trustworthy? The novel gradually drops clues and hints as it progresses, helping both Miranda and the reader solve the mystery.

The developmental value of a mystery like this is that it stimulates the reader's thinking as she tries to solve the puzzle. Just as Miranda is straining to solve the mystery, so is the reader. And this process of figuring out a complex plot forces the reader to use deductive reasoning (the stuff of logic), and reasoning to the best explanation (roughly, the stuff of science). Not only must the reader try to arrange the outward clues—e.g., messages, missing objects, human actions—into a coherent picture, but she must also integrate the reasons and motives that drive the characters in the story. This sort of reasoning is great mental exercise and can contribute to the expansion of a child's intellectual abilities in a fun, engaging way.

A complex plot also generally tells several different stories at once. These are often the stories of the central and secondary characters in the book. As I have noted, in *When You Reach Me* the main story is the unraveling of the mystery set by the anonymous notes Miranda receives. However, there are also many secondary stories woven into the central story. For example, the novel traces the puzzling development of Miranda's estranged relationship with Sal, her growing friendships with Annemarie and Colin, the story of her mother's escape from a boring job, and the story of the seemingly crazy homeless man on the corner, who sleeps with his head under a mailbox.

The developmental value of reading complex stories like this—i.e., stories that have “wheels within wheels”—is that a child must hold in mind many plotlines at once, and must remember how those plotlines overlap and integrate into a whole. In short, reading children's books with multiple simultaneous plotlines requires a child to exercise her memory in challenging and productive ways. This is not the dull exercise of flash-card memorization, but rather a dynamic exercise of memory, driven by the child's desire to understand an interesting story.

Story Complexity and Younger Children

The connection I have drawn between story complexity and child de-

velopment is most obviously applicable to older children—i.e., roughly children older than nine years of age—whose memory and reasoning abilities have progressed to a level such that they can benefit from complex stories like those in *When You Reach Me* and the Harry Potter novels. Younger children can also benefit from complex stories; however, the level of complexity must be tempered to meet the abilities of the younger child.

The aim for a younger child should be to expose him to a level of complexity that stretches him, but does not exasperate him. There is no formulaic way to determine this level and find books to match. The best advice is just to notice your child's level of intellectual development (e.g., is he able to give reasons for his thoughts and actions? Does he remember things he reads?), and try some books. If you overshoot, you can always save a book for later. Reading a complex story to a younger child, and helping him with it, is also a nice way to encourage the sort of development I have touched on in this section (not to mention the myriad other benefits that come with reading to children).

Two books by Graeme Base—*The Sign of the Seahorse*, and *The Eleventh Hour*—are nice examples of complex stories appropriate for children aged six-to-eight-years. Both have a large range of characters and challenge the reader with mysteries and riddles to solve, not to mention interesting themes and fantastic illustrations. Six-to-eight-year-olds would especially benefit from reading Base's complex stories with an adult (my kids have!).

3.5 Children's Books and Moral Development

Several features of children's books have the potential to influence a child's moral development. In this section I will begin with a brief discussion of how character is formed in people—and especially children—drawing on the philosophical resources of Aristotle and Plato. Next, I will discuss some of the features of children's books that might

play a role in forming character or virtue in children. Specifically, I will talk about the role of characters and stories on virtue formation, with a special discussion of the place of mischief in children's books. I will also offer some guidance for adults on what to look for in books that will positively influence a child's moral development.

Character Development in Children: A Philosopher's View



Plato (L) and Aristotle (R), Raphael's "The School of Athens"

As Aristotle taught us in the **Nicomachean Ethics** character development occurs, at least in part, as a result of habitual experience. The more we practice—or make a habit of—certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, the more we develop character tendencies to think, feel, and act in these ways.

Moreover, Plato taught us in the **Republic** that character is especially sensitive to such shaping and molding at a young age. In the **Republic**, Plato writes (via his dialogue character, Socrates), “You know, don't you, that the beginning of any process is most important, especially for anything young and tender? It's at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it” (**Republic** 377a-b).

We might think here of an analogy with water flowing over soil. When children are young, their character is like soft soil, and their thoughts, feelings, and actions are like water flowing over that soil. As it flows, the water begins to work grooves or channels in the soil in certain places. The more water that flows in these particular grooves, the more pronounced the grooves become, growing from small rivulets into creeks and rivers. Over time, the soil hardens somewhat, and the grooves become more fixed in place (though perhaps never completely). Similarly, the habitual grooves of our character become more fixed in place as we develop into adults.

Now, not only lived experiences shape our character. The vicarious experiences derived from books can also shape us. Indeed, this is the idea behind books like William J. Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*, an excellent anthology that retells traditional stories thought to shape the character of children in beneficial ways. In the introduction to *The Book of Virtues*, Bennett writes, "If we want our children to possess the traits of character we most admire, we need to teach them what those traits are and why they deserve both admiration and allegiance. Children must learn to identify the forms and content of those traits" (p. 11).

Bennett's thought is that by reading traditional stories of virtue, and by observing the characters in such stories, children will be helped along in this process of developing "moral literacy", i.e., the ability to identify and value the virtues. Children will learn from such stories and characters how they ought to think and act, and then they will imitate what they have seen.

Described in this way, the process by which characters and stories stimulate virtue in children is primarily cognitive: children observe the good activity, and then intentionally repeat it. However, this description leaves out an affective aspect of character development in children that may actually be more important than the cognitive aspect.

How a Book's Characters Influence Moral Development

When a child reads a good book, she will often identify with one or several of the characters (e.g., the protagonist). In other words, a compelling character in an interesting story will draw the child into an emotional connection with the character, and the child will vicariously live the story as the protagonist, to some extent. Or, the child will become "friends", in a certain sense, with the protagonist: she will cheer when the protagonist succeeds, worry when she fails, and will want to spend more time with her.

Of course, this phenomenon is not limited to children: when I read *The*

Hunger Games ([click for review](#)), there were times when it seemed my heart was pounding as hard as Katniss's; and when I was reading the Harry Potter novels I literally missed Harry, Ron, and Hermione if I hadn't "spent time" with them lately.



The point is that the affective engagement with characters in books—through identification or friendship with them—is just another kind of water running over the soil. When a child identifies with a character emotionally, it is as if she is experiencing the character's thoughts, feelings, and actions herself. These experiences, then, begin to wear grooves of their own in the child's character. The child is subtly pressed to think, feel, act, and value as the protagonist does.

Similarly, when a child becomes "friends" with a character in a book, she learns from that character in a way that goes beyond merely observing and intentionally trying to imitate. Just as in ordinary friendships, the child's fictional friend "rubs off" on her. The pleasures, struggles, and choices of the fictional friend subtly become the child's pleasures, struggles, and choices. In a good story with compelling characters, all this happens subconsciously.

Moreover, it is important to point out that all this can work for ill, as well as for good. As St. Paul reminds us (quoting Menander), "Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Cor. 15.33) In other words, just as bad real friends can influence the character development of children negatively, so can bad fictional friends. And identifying with a bad character in a book can be like developing a bad habit.

What to Look For: Exemplary Characters

The obvious upshot, here, is that adults should look for books with protagonists that exhibit the right sort of activities and values, i.e., books with exemplary characters. If you want your child to be courageous,

give her books with courageous characters. If you want your child to persevere, give him books with characters that persevere. Similarly, if you want your child to enjoy potty humor, give her books with characters that revel in potty humor. Or, if you want your child to be disrespectful toward others, give him books with characters that are disrespectful toward others. (My tongue is firmly in my cheek.)

Moreover, this same obvious point applies to both fiction and non-fiction books. Although I have been focused mainly on fiction, a good biography, or a history book with compelling characters, will have much the same effect. It is a regular, and I believe influential, part of my children's home-school education to read about the lives of interesting and generally virtuous historical people.

Perhaps a less obvious point in all this is that my analysis does not mean that adults should find books with characters that do everything just right. Indeed, I urge you not to do that! The reason such picture-perfect characters are not developmentally helpful is that they generally come across as shallow, wooden, and unrealistic. In short, these characters are not believable and have little emotional purchase on us. We don't identify with them because we are not simple and perfect (rather, complicated and imperfect), and we don't want to be friends with them because they aren't interesting.

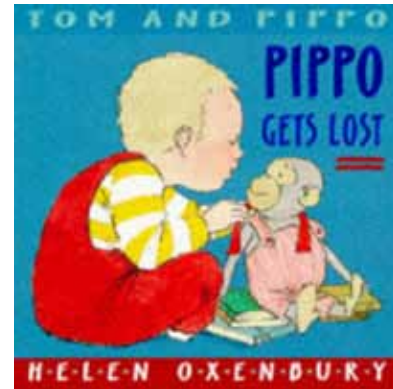
Thus, the best kind of character is one that is more realistic and complex. Such characters sometimes blow it. Harry Potter provides a perfect ex-



ample: sometimes he does some bad stuff. However, that does not disqualify him as an exemplary character, since he generally feels remorse when he does wrong, and the overall orientation of his character is toward good and against evil. Moreover, when Harry does wrong, J.K. Rowling generally has him suffer some consequences, which helps mold a young reader's character in the right direction. In short, it is not a problem if compelling characters do bad

and get bad; what is a problem, in my view, is if compelling characters do bad and get good. A child's affective engagement with a character that does bad and gets good generates and reinforces the wrong sort of patterns in her character.

Lest my Harry Potter example make you think that I'm talking only about books for tweens and teens, let me emphasize that I intend for all that I've said to apply to books for younger children too. For example, in [Pippo Gets Lost](#), by Helen Oxenbury ([click for review](#)), I think Tom's effort (with the help of his parents) to find Pippo, his lost toy monkey, subtly encourages perseverance in toddlers. However, Tom also reflects the realistic frailties of toddlers (and people in general): half-way through the search he gets discouraged and upset. Thus, Tom is both virtuous and realistic, a character that toddlers happily identify with and befriend.



How Stories Influence Moral Development

Historically, story telling for children has been a feature of most cultures. Often, this story telling has had the purpose, at least in part, of forming the character of children. [Aesop's Fables](#) and [Grimm's Fairy Tales](#) are good examples of traditional stories that have aimed at developing character in children. The success of books like William Bennett's [The Book of Virtues](#) suggests that many in our contemporary culture also recognize the connection between stories and the formation of character and values in children.

But, how do stories shape the character of children? As I already noted in connection with Bennett's [The Book of Virtues](#), one way is simply by showing kids what virtuous character traits look like in action. Bennett suggests that learning to recognize virtuous character through stories amounts to developing a sort of "moral literacy." Just as kids need to

learn to read and write, they also need to learn to recognize and perform virtuous activity.

As John Goldingay suggests, stories contribute to this learning process by drawing children into a world created by the author. In this world, children are attentive to the things the author picks out, things that they might not otherwise attend to among the many facts that stimulate them. As Goldingay puts it, “By portraying a past or imaginary or other world they [authors] issue a promise, a challenge, or an invitation that opens up a future or a possible world” (Goldingay, 65). In other words, stories show children a world that could be, and that should or should not be, and draw them into it.

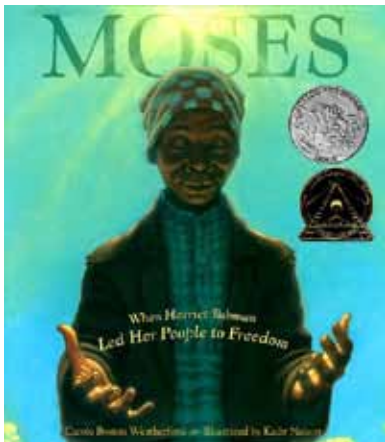
To put things in the language of moral philosopher Barbara Herman, being drawn into a story can help children learn the “rules of moral salience”, i.e., the rules about which features of the world have ethical importance and which do not (*The Practice of Moral Judgment*, pp.77-78). For example, stories help children distinguish decisions involving injuries, deception, and promises—morally relevant features of the world—from decisions to scratch one’s nose, or to go out for dinner—which do not generally have moral import. This seems to be the sort of learning that Bennett has in mind when he speaks of developing moral literacy.

Finally, similar to the way in which exemplary characters in children’s books can shape character, stories can engage the emotions of a child in a way that forms character. As a child is drawn into a story, to some extent she experiences the world of the story as she would experience real life. However, engagement with the world of a story tends to be more affectively stimulating since stories cut out many of the boring parts of life. In stories, children get experiential high points, and the affective aspects of these experiences tend to ingrain the experience on a child’s character in a way that does not happen during the ordinary, boring parts of life. Just as we are shaped by the emotionally charged experiences of our lives—whether positive or traumatic—so engaging stories can shape us, because of (and through) their emotional charge.

Thus, reading a moving story of bravery can embolden children to face life's trials with courage. Or, reading an engaging story in which lying turns out badly can strengthen a child's resolve against lying. Conversely, an affectively engaging story in which characters are mean without consequence can stimulate similar unkindness in children.

What to Look for: Character Building Stories

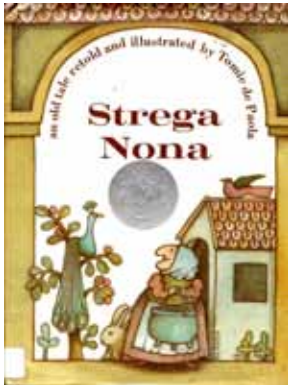
Given what I've already said about the role of stories in the character formation of children, my advice on choosing children's stories will again seem pretty obvious. First, choose stories that cast good values in a positive light. In other words, choose stories that hold up virtues such as courage, self-control, friendship, or justice as attractive—as worthy of a child's activity.



For example, [Martin's Big Words](#) ([click for review](#)) or [Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom](#)—picture books that feature African-American freedom-fighters Martin Luther King Jr. and Harriet Tubman—illustrate justice and courage in a way that might stir a child to embody such values. Similarly, as I have mentioned, 2010 Newbery Medal winner [When You Reach Me](#) explores the nature of friendship in a way that might encourage a child to richer and wiser friendships.

Second, avoid stories that cast bad values in a positive light. Such stories draw kids to the wrong sorts of character and behavior. Lately, [Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#) and the [Captain Underpants](#) series have been my favorite punching bags in this respect. I will say a bit more about these books in the following section. Regardless, while you may disagree with my assessment of these particular books, surely the principle of avoiding books that positively cast bad values is correct.

Third, and importantly, avoiding stories that make bad values attractive does not entail steering clear of stories in which bad things happen, or even stories in which people make morally bad choices. Stories in which characters—even central characters—do bad things can still impel a child toward good character.



For example, the central moral lesson of one of the most famous of [Aesop's Fables](#) —“The Boy who Cried Wolf”—is drawn from a character who lies repeatedly. Similarly, in Tomie dePaola's [Strega Nona](#), Big Anthony cannot keep his hands off of Strega Nona's magical pasta pot—despite having promised to do so. What makes stories like these worthy of choice, despite the bad actions of the characters, is that the bad actors experience bad consequences as a result of their actions. On some versions of Aesop's Fable, the alarmist boy is eaten by a wolf when no one believes his warning cry (after so many false ones). In [Strega Nona](#), Big Anthony floods the town with pasta and has to over-eat his way out of the mess. These negative consequences help children properly view lying and promise-breaking as generally “not to be performed”.

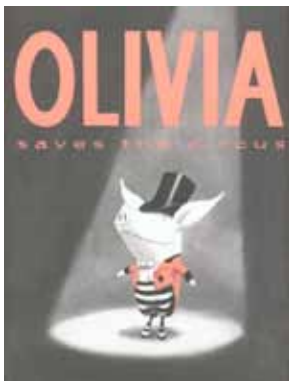
As a final piece of advice, I suggest asking yourself a key question when trying to determine whether a story is liable to shape a child's character in the right way: what does the story invite me to take pleasure in? If the answer is something that you think is genuinely valuable (or at least neutral), then the story may be a good choice (assuming it's also a book with subjective appeal). However, if the answer turns out not to be something you want your child to act out or embody (e.g., humiliating or betraying others), run away! It can also be useful to ask what a story invites you to be uneasy about, i.e., preferably bad things, though it is rare for a children's book to encourage uneasiness about good things. (Authors generally reserve uneasiness about good things for creepy adult books.)

3.6 Mischief in Children's Books

Mischief is very common in children's books. Given its prevalence, and its potential to shape the character of children, it is a topic that deserves some special focus, which I will try to give it in this section. Specifically, I will try to distinguish benign mischief from pernicious mischief, and to give some guidance on choosing or avoiding books that feature mischief.



So, what do I mean by “mischief”? By “mischief” I mean intentional behavior by the characters in the book that strays, to some extent, from what is appropriate or good. The function of mischief in children's books is generally to elicit laughs. Some examples will help clarify what I mean.



In Ian Falconer's *Olivia*, the main character—Olivia, a five- to six-year-old pig—is quite mischievous. For example, after returning from the Museum of Modern Art she decides that she can paint just as well as *Jackson Pollock*, and she proceeds to splatter paint on her living room walls. In *Olivia Saves the Circus*, she tells fantastic and fallacious tales of her summer vacation in front of her classmates. When questioned by her teacher, she affirms that her stories are “pretty all true”. These mischievous deeds were, of course, met with irrepressible giggles when I read the books to my kids years ago.

Mischief is also the stock and trade of the *Captain Underpants* books. George Beard and Harold Hutchins—protagonists in the *Captain Underpants* series—are consummate pranksters. For example, they put black pepper in the pom-poms of their school cheerleaders causing the cheerleaders to sneeze uncontrollably, they put bubble bath in the marching band's horns so the band's playing just ends up blowing bubbles, and they replace the football team's muscle rub lotion with “Mr.

Prankster's Extra-Scratchy Itching Cream." Such antics, of course, almost always make kids laugh.

However, [as I have written previously](#), I think George and Harold's high jinks cross the line at times. For example, in chapter two George and Harold sneak into the school office and make several hundred copies of their Captain Underpants comic book, which they proceed to sell at a profit on the playground. Moreover, in chapter 12 after hypnotizing Mr. Krupp (their principal), the boys steal Mr. Krupp's videotape evidence of their disruptive pranks.

Pernicious Mischief

In my view, several considerations distinguish these latter acts of mischief from the pranks Harold and George pulled on their schoolmates, and make them examples of pernicious mischief that adults ought to avoid in choosing children's books. First, and perhaps most obviously, the acts of photocopying their comics with the school copier and lifting Mr. Krupp's videotape both cross ethical lines—after all, they are both cases of stealing.



Now, as I argued above, behavior of characters in children's books that crosses ethical lines is not necessarily pernicious. However, when coupled with the fact that the characters get away with such behavior—or are rewarded for it (which is the case in [The Adventures of Captain Underpants](#))—it begins to be pernicious in my view. Children subtly get the message that unethical behavior such as lying and stealing is a good way out of sticky situations.

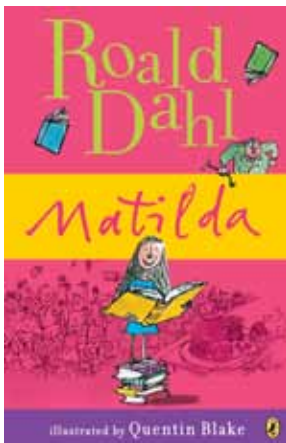
The power of such a message is enhanced by the fact (which I noted above) that children identify with the characters in the books they read, and become friends with them in a certain sense. Moreover, the fact that such mischief inspires laughs makes matters worse: kids are actually

enjoying Harold and George’s transgressions, which promotes the opposite of the sensibility that adults should be aiming to cultivate in children. [As I have written previously](#), I think Jeff Kinney’s Wimpy Kid books suffer from a similar defect: they encourage kids to revel in behavior that is downright mean and unethical.

Thus, in short, I think adults should avoid children’s books that encourage kids to laugh and enjoy as the protagonists cross ethical boundaries with impunity. Such behavior from central characters—which I call “pernicious mischief”—encourages the wrong sort of character in children, and thus can hinder positive child development.

Benign Mischief

Benign mischief, on the other hand, is mischief that makes a book humorous to a child, without pernicious effects on the child’s character. Such mischief is nothing for adults to worry about, and may well be a reason for choosing a book, if it makes a book especially attractive for a child. Benign mischief may take several forms.



First, it could simply be behavior that is inappropriate in a minor way that does not cross ethical boundaries. For example, in Roald Dahl’s [Matilda](#), one day the central character, Matilda, puts a live fish in the drinking water of her tyrannical principal, Miss Trunchbull. Although such an act might have been mean under certain circumstances, given Trunchbull’s prior cruelty, the act amounts to a humorous form of justice that does not violate any ethical boundaries.

Ramona’s antics in [Beezus and Ramona](#) ([click for review](#)) provide another example of this kind of benign mischief. One day while her older sister Beezus is looking after her, 4-year-old Ramona sneaks into the basement, finds a box of apples, and proceeds to take one bite out of each apple in the box. Why? Because the first bite of an apple is always the

best. Here again, the misbehavior does not cross any ethical boundaries and exhibits a kind of endearing childish rationale that makes even adults chuckle. Moreover, Ramona is not simply let off the hook for her mischief. Thus, I take this to be an example of benign mischief.



A second form of benign mischief is misbehavior that is only partially intentional. For example, in Kay Thompson's *Eloise Takes a Bath*, the main character Eloise fills her bath to overflowing and imagines herself on wild water adventures. In the process she floods the high-rise hotel she is staying in. While Eloise seems to intentionally overflow her bathtub (thereby making her behavior mischievous), two factors ameliorate her mischief. First, she got carried away in her world of imagination, and thus her behavior was only partially intentional; she surely did not mean to flood the hotel. Second, the consequences of Eloise's misbehavior come out okay in the end.

Olivia's wild lies about saving the circus in *Olivia Saves the Circus* seem also to be only partially intentional. Yes, she knows she is stretching the truth (she probably went to see the circus at least), but her wild imagination seems to carry her away such that she is not entirely in control of her faculties. For this reason, her tall tales seem benign to me. The mischief of the *Junie B. Jones* series seems to be roughly of this sort too.

A third kind of mischief is behavior that is so fantastical that children know it is not a model for behavior in any sense. Eloise's "bawhtub" escapades border on this sort of fantastical, but Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* is a better example. In this classic book for new readers, the Cat in the Hat—not to mention Thing 1 and Thing 2—performs all sorts of destructive mischief. However, the whole context of the story is so fantastical that there is no danger of identification and emulation: kids realize that this is basically an exercise in imagination. If anything, kids identify with the worried fish and the children in the book, not the Cat and his minions of mayhem. Moreover, the Cat cleans up all the mess before

mom gets home.

In the end, I have to admit that this talk of mischief is all very subtle. The line between benign and pernicious mischief reminds me of the line between funny and hurtful when giving a friend a “hard time”: sometimes it is difficult to know exactly where that line is, but it is usually clear when you’ve crossed it. I’ve tried to offer some objective criteria for distinguishing between benign and pernicious mischief in children’s books, but the truth is that this topic is pretty squishy, contextual, and open to different perspectives: I’m pretty certain not everyone will agree with where I’ve come down on the topic. In any case, I hope that my thoughts will at least have provoked some reflection about mischief.

3.7 Children’s Books and Aesthetic Development

Finally, books can also influence a child’s aesthetic development, i.e., the growth of her capacity to appreciate beauty. In this section I will briefly suggest how this might occur, and I will offer some advice on picking books that might further a child’s aesthetic sensibility.

Illustrations and Aesthetic Development

Perhaps the most obvious way children’s books can stimulate a child’s aesthetic sense is via their illustrations. As children are exposed to the beautiful artwork of excellent illustrations, their taste for visual beauty is encouraged.

Although any guidance on what to look for here will undoubtedly be somewhat subjective, my advice is to look for illustrations that strike you as beautiful, interesting, and creative, or that might expand a child’s understanding of what is beautiful. An example here might help.

As I mentioned in [Section 2.3](#), the illustrations of Ezra Jack Keats were very influential for me as a child: I still have vivid visual memories of

them. One thing that was so striking about them was their mixed-media collage design. In many of his illustrations, Keats combined gouache with interestingly-textured everyday materials—such as newspaper and fabric. As a child I remember having the impression that I had never seen anything like Keats’s illustrations before. Although they were different, I wanted to look at them over and over because they were so interesting. Reflecting back on that experience, it seems to me that Keats’s artwork opened my eyes to new possibilities for beauty and creativity.



Language and Aesthetic Development

The language of a children’s book can also contribute to a child’s aesthetic sensibility. Specifically, books with beautiful, elevating language—whether poetry or prose—encourage appreciation of verbal beauty. If an adult chooses books with such beautiful language, children will come to appreciate and expect such beauty in their literature and in other areas of their life.

The opportunity for verbal beauty is especially ripe in teen and young adult books (i.e., 13 to 19 years old). At this stage most children have mastered the basics of reading and are ready to appreciate elevated prose. One part of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Book 7)* provides a nice example. At the end of chapter 23 one of Harry’s friends—Dobby, the house-elf—tragically dies, and Rowling describes it as follows: “And then with a little shudder the elf became quite still, and his eyes were nothing more than great glassy orbs, sprinkled with light from the stars they could not see” (p. 476). I believe the moving beauty of this language primes a child to appreciate beauty in all aspects of life.

Though the aesthetic aspect of edifying language is particularly important in books for older children, it can also be very effective in books for

younger children. For example, Barbara Berger's board book [Grandfather Twilight](#) ([click for review](#)) effectively employs beautiful language in a book for toddlers.

CHAPTER 4

COMMERCIALISM AND CHILDREN'S BOOKS

In this chapter, I will briefly address the issue of commercialism in children's literature. Specifically, I will offer some advice on avoiding overly commercial children's literature, and argue for why parents ought to do so. I will use Disney Princess books—and the Disney Princess Collection in particular—as a concrete example of an important kind of book adults should avoid exposing children to.

4.1 Reasons to Avoid Disney Princess Books (and Their ilk)



Why avoid Disney Princess books? First, the stories in such books are generally of a very low quality. For example, in the *Disney Princess Collection*, the “stories” are basically just 10-page summaries of movies like “Snow White”, “Sleeping Beauty”, “Beauty and the Beast”, and “The Little Mermaid”. It doesn’t get much less creative than that.

Moreover, unlike the movies themselves, there is virtually no character development in the stories, so they come off as totally flat and boring. Exposing children to this sort of book instills very low expectations of literature, and does nothing to encourage a taste for creative, lively, interesting writing. In short, stories like this have very little developmental

value, and would have virtually no subjective appeal were it not for the pictures of pink princesses and the child's associations with the corresponding movies, TV shows, trips to Disneyland, etc.

Second, in some cases books of this sort can actually be developmentally detrimental. For example, I think the stories and characters in the [Disney Princess Collection](#) foster a generally insidious set of values. Many of them encourage a passive, helpless conception of femininity (why else would the princesses always need to be rescued?), terrible expectations of romantic relationships (bordering on the idolatrous, in my view), and damaging female body image. In short, Disney's portrayal of princesses generally undermines the sort of balanced self-understanding that is foundational for a child's healthy development. ([Click here for a nice elaboration on the troubling values Disney's princesses encourage.](#))

Third, books like the [Disney Princess Collection](#) are really just instruments to capitalize on and perpetuate the marketing of huge corporate machines such as Disney. The point of publishing these books is not to expand a child's horizons with good literature, but rather to subtly and steadily transform her into a loyal consumer of a certain kind of products. Here is a quote from the head of Disney, in 1989, taken from an excellent [article on marketing to children](#): "The Disney Stores promote the consumer products which promote the [theme] parks which promote the television shows. The television shows promote the company." In other words, Disney has a very tight and coordinated strategy to promote their brand. This strategy involves saturating the children's market with toys, TV shows, radio programs, movies, and lame excuses for books, so that children will become life-long contributors to the Disney Empire. Makes me shiver to think about it. In short, these books are mere instruments for generating money.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, I have no problem with authors, publishers, and marketers of children's books being paid for the work they do. Thus, I have no principled problem with treating children's books

as commodities (i.e., items to be bought and sold). Indeed, if we could not buy and sell children's books, I'll wager there wouldn't be nearly the variety and quality that we see today, since authors would be unable to devote a lifetime to working on their craft. What I do object to is the thoughtless production of low-quality literature for the sole purpose of generating profits and brand loyalty. In my view, that's what a book like the [Disney Princess Collection](#) is about.

4.2 The Plush Toy Test

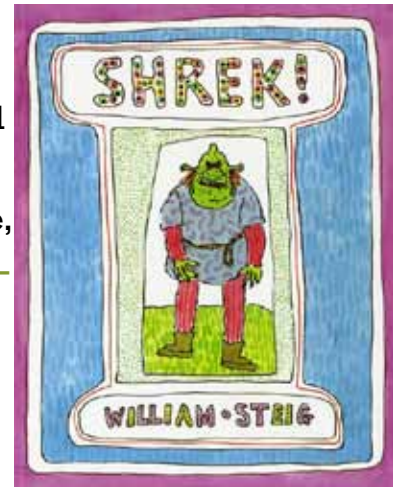
With this brief rant complete, I will conclude with a bit of advice on how to identify overly commercialized books, so that you can avoid them more easily. In short, I recommend that you apply what I will call, the "plush toy test." Here's how it works: when you come across a children's book that you are considering whether to choose, ask yourself whether you have previously seen the characters in the story via some other form of mass media. Have you noticed a movie or TV show about them? Did your children receive a toy in their McDonald's happy meal that looks like one of them? Does your child snuggle at night with a plush toy that looks like the main character? If so, chances are good that the book is a low-quality pawn in a huge marketing campaign, and thus is not worth your time or money.

A few examples might help clarify the plush toy test a bit. Maurice Sendak's classic 1963 picture book [Where the Wild Things Are](#) was, of course, recently made into a [feature film](#). But, since the book preceded the movie by a long period of time (and since the book was so famous and ground-breaking), chances are you would not have encountered the mass-merchandising machine that often accompanies the release of children's feature films before you encountered the book. In other words, you probably wouldn't have seen plush toys of Max or his Wild Things kicking around before you knew about the book.

Alternatively, it is very likely that you would have encountered a plush

toy of **Spongebob Squarepants**, **Dora the Explorer**, or the **Disney Princesses** (or some other mass-media representation of them) before you ever encountered a book with one of these characters in it. As a result, the plush toy test should raise a red flag if you were considering a book like that.

Of course, the plush toy test will not be fool-proof: in some cases you might not discover a perfectly good book until after the movie based on it has already become wildly popular and invaded McDonald's happy meals. For example, this might be the case with the **Harry Potter novels**, or with William Steig's original 1990 picture book, **Shrek!**. However, the plush toy test will at least be a rough-cut way of making you pause and examine the commercial character of the book you are considering for your child.



CHAPTER 5 TRUSTED OPINIONS

In this final chapter I will briefly point to a number of book lists and other resources that can help adults find great children’s books, i.e., sources of what I call “trusted opinions” about children’s books. Relying on the opinions of those who put such lists and resources together is of course not a fail-safe way to find good children’s books, but it can be a quick way to zero in on some that are probably good. Such lists and resources should not replace your own judgment about children’s books—which I hope has been refined a bit as a result of this book—but they can be a helpful supplement.

Before launching into the resources, I want to emphasize what may already be obvious: the children’s librarian at your local library is a fantastic source of recommendations and information on children’s books. If you are looking for kids’ books, I strongly encourage you to spend time talking with the librarian in the children’s section of your local library.

5.1 Lists of Children’s Books

The first kind of resource that can help you find great children’s books quickly is a book list. There are many great book lists out there, but here are some of my favorites:

List of Newbery Award Winners. Newbery winners are children’s nov-



els (not picture books) aimed at children of “middle-grade” age, i.e., roughly 8 to 12 years old. Although readers’ tastes may sometimes diverge from the judgments of the Newbery panel, books on this list are generally pretty high-quality and interesting to read. The official description of the Newbery Medal is as follows: “The Newbery Medal was named for

eighteenth-century British bookseller John Newbery. It is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children.” [ALA Newbery Medal website](#)

List of Caldecott Award Winners. The Caldecott Medal is awarded to picture books generally aimed at younger children (i.e., in the 3-to-8-year-old category). Technically, the Caldecott Medal is awarded for the artwork in the picture book, not the story or the book as a whole. However, a book must be of pretty high quality as a whole (i.e., story included) in order to win the Caldecott, so you don’t generally get beautiful-looking duds receiving the medal. As such, Caldecott books are a good place to start looking for picture books for younger children. The official blurb on the Caldecott Medal is as follows: “The Caldecott Medal was named in honor of nineteenth-century English illustrator Randolph Caldecott. It is awarded annually by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children.” [ALA Caldecott Medal website](#)

List of Coretta Scott King Award Winners. Coretta Scott King awards are given to African American authors and illustrators. This list is an excellent starting point for finding high-quality multicultural books with African American characters and themes. The official blurb on the Coretta Scott King awards is as follows: “Given to African American authors and illustrators for outstanding inspirational and educational contributions,

the Coretta Scott King Book Award titles promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American dream of a pluralistic society. The award is designed to commemorate the life and works of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to honor Mrs. Coretta Scott King for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace and world brotherhood.” [ALA Coretta Scott King Award website](#)

List of Geisel Award Winners. The Geisel award is named for Dr. Theodore Seuss Geisel, i.e., Dr. Seuss. Sensibly enough, it is awarded to children’s books for beginning readers, sometimes called “easy readers”. Of course, Dr. Seuss pioneered this genre of children’s books with his “I Can Read” books. Official blurb: “The Geisel Award is given annually to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished American book for beginning readers published in English in the United States during the preceding year.” [ALA Geisel Award website](#)

List of Michael L. Printz Award Winners. The list of Printz Award winners is a great place to start looking for books for the young adults in your life. Blurb: “The Michael L. Printz Award is an award for a book that exemplifies literary excellence in young adult literature. It is named for a Topeka, Kansas school librarian who was a long-time active member of the Young Adult Library Services Association. The award is sponsored by [Booklist](#), a publication of the American Library Association.” [ALA Michael L. Printz Award website](#)

100 Picture Books Everyone Should Know. This is a great list of picture books posted on the New York Public Library website. The list is a helpful resource for finding books for younger children. It has both some newer picture books, as well as many old classics that are not to be missed.

The Top 100 Children’s Novels according to A Fuse #8 Production. In 2010 blogger Elizabeth (“Betsy”) Bird ran a poll among kidlit bloggers to determine the top 100 children’s novels of all time. The results are

at the link just given, and constitute a very helpful resource for finding good books for middle-grade children and older (roughly ages 8 years and up).

Librarian's Choices. Beginning in 2003, Sylvia Vardell—author and professor at Texas Woman's University—and others began an annual project to identify and list the 100 most outstanding new books for children and young adults. The books on the list are chosen by a select group of librarians in the Dallas/Fort Worth area of Texas; hence the name, “Librarian's Choices”. The project is currently working to put online brief reviews and guidance on how to use each book (this information is complete for 2004, 2005, and 2011). I think this is one of the best lists of new children's books available.

Finally, for fantasy/science-fiction lovers, I have two lists to recommend, both maintained by Charlotte Taylor on her blog **Charlotte's Library**. The first is a **list of time travel or “timeslip” books**, as she likes to call them. These books feature travel or “slip” between different time periods in some way, and are mostly aimed at middle-grade and young adult audiences. Charlotte also maintains a **list of fantasy/sci-fi books featuring main characters of diverse ethnicity and culture**. These two lists (especially the second) are unique and rare gems that ought to be widely utilized by adults that know fantasy/sci-fi-loving kids.

5.2 Professional Children's Book Reviews

There are a number of good online and print sources for professional reviews of new children's books. My favorites are below:

Kirkus Children's Book Reviews. This site is amazing, a bit overwhelming even. It publishes brief professional (free) reviews of tons of children's books. It is a key place to visit if you want to know what is new and good in children's books. The books with stars beside them (i.e., “starred reviews”) are books that Kirkus reviewers thought were espe-

cially good. Kirkus also maintains a bunch of book lists that can help you get to books on various interesting themes, such as “Spunky Historical Heroines”, “Baseball Roundup for Kids,” and “Children and the Wild World.” Kirkus also publishes a print magazine and reviews of adult books.

School Library Journal. This is another great source for professional reviews of new children’s books. The website is not quite as slick as Kirkus’s, but there are still many good reviews. Just click on the “reviews” navigation tab. SLJ bills itself as “The world’s largest reviewer of books, multimedia, and technology for children and teens.” SLJ also publishes a print magazine and their website hosts some of the more popular children’s books blogs in the kidlitosphere (see below).

Booklist Online. This is the online version of the American Library Association’s (ALA) print magazine, “Booklist”. Both the print and online versions are great sources for new children’s book reviews, though you will need to subscribe (\$295/year for an individual) in order to read them. Booklist Online also hosts a number of popular kidlit blogs, including one of my favorites (see below). You can get the magazine in your local library if you don’t want to subscribe.

The Horn Book Guide. The link is to the online version of The Horn Book Guide print magazine. According to its online blurb, “Each semi-annual issue of the print Horn Book Guide rates and reviews over 2,000 titles — virtually every children’s and young adult book published in the U.S. in a six-month period.” So, this is obviously a pretty comprehensive guide to new children’s books. However, like Booklist Online, you will need to subscribe (though only \$3/month) in order to see the reviews online. You can also get The Horn Book Guide at your local library.

The New York Times Book Review - Children’s Books. Of course, The New York Times Book Review is also a helpful source of professional reviews of new children’s books. They publish roughly four reviews online each month. Not comprehensive, but still a helpful contribution.

5.3 Children's Book Blogs

Finally, of course, there are a many, many blogs about children's books that can give you solid direction in finding good children's books. Below I list some of my favorites, with additional links to interviews I've conducted with the bloggers.

Many of these bloggers write more than just book reviews (e.g., they share news about children's books, author interviews, etc.), so if you want a distilled collection of blogger book reviews I recommend [Children's Book Reviews](#), which is a wiki site to which many bloggers (including me) contribute their children's book reviews. It is a great source of information on books for kids.

Finally, if you are not satisfied with my blogger shortlist below, there is a more comprehensive list of kidlit bloggers here at [Kidlitosphere Central](#) (along with other resources that might interest you). Now, my favorites:

[Jen Robinson's Book Page](#) ([click for an interview with Jen](#)).

[Book Nut](#) ([click for an interview with blogger Melissa Fox](#)).

[A Fuse #8 Production](#). A Fuse #8 Production is hosted on the School Library Journal website ([click for an interview with blogger Betsy Bird](#)).

[The Brown Bookshelf](#). Great source for multicultural (esp. African American) children's literature ([click for an interview with Brown Bookshelf blogger and illustrator Don Tate](#)).

[Bookends](#). Bookends is hosted on the Booklist Online website ([click for an interview with Bookends bloggers Cindy Dobrez and Lynn Rutan](#)).

[Rasco from RIF](#) ([click for an interview with blogger Carol Rasco](#)).

[The Reading Tub](#) ([click for an interview with blogger Terry Doherty](#)).

[Charlotte's Library](#) ([click for an interview with blogger Charlotte Tay-](#)

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[Chasing Ray](#) (click for an interview with blogger Colleen Mondor).

[Cynsations](#) (click for an interview with blogger and author Cynthia Leitich Smith).

[About.com Children's Books](#) (click for an interview with blogger Elizabeth Kennedy).

[educating alice](#) (click for an interview with blogger Monica Edinger).

[100 Scope Notes](#) (click for an interview with blogger Travis Jonker).

[Poetry for Children](#) (click for an interview with blogger Sylvia Vardell).

[The Well-Read Child](#) (click for an interview with blogger Jill Tullo).

[Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast](#) (click for an interview with blogger Julie Danielson).

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

In this book I have tried to provide adults with some resources to help them become more savvy selectors of children's books.

First, I have tried to outline a simple framework of criteria for distinguishing good children's books from not so good ones. Specifically, I have urged adults to look for books that have both subjective appeal and developmental value for children. Books with subjective appeal will have certain characteristics that make the book attractive for a child, such as interesting themes, appealing illustrations, a gripping story, or humor. Books with developmental value will contribute in some way to a child's linguistic, cognitive, moral, or aesthetic development. I also issued a warning about avoiding overly commercial books that do not really have the enjoyment or welfare of the child at heart.

Second, I pointed to a range of trusted opinions that adults might consult in tracking down good children's books. Specifically, I directed readers to some great lists of children's books, some sources for professional book reviews, and some of my favorite children's book blogs.

My discussion of these topics has been, of course, only a beginning. Nevertheless, I hope that it has been a helpful and eye opening beginning in some respects, and that it encourages those who care about children's books in the right direction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Mead is a graduate student in philosophy, a civil engineer, and the editor of the popular children's book blog [Children's Books and Reviews](#). He lives in Pasadena, California, with his wife and two children.