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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, December 9, 1931

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Shopping for Children's Books." Information in part from "Children's Reading" by Terman and Lima. Approved by the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

"A good book is the best of friends, the same today and forever." So wrote John Tupper years and years ago.

I've thought of that remark several times recently while I've been doing my holiday shopping. The stores are full of Christmas displays of gifts for children. And we shoppers have to decide between tempting arrays of toys and games and books. Did you ever notice that many parents who are quite willing to give their children quantities of toys, even expensive ones, feel that they can't afford to spend money on good books? Jimmy can have an expensive electric toy engine that runs on a track and all the contrivances to go with it, but a fine book--well, Father says, after all that's a luxury in these days. As a matter of fact, Jimmy needs both the right toys and the right books to help prepare him for a happy and successful life.

Psychologists tell us that children receive their knowledge of the world--their education--from just three sources. First, what they hear, or verbal instruction. Second, personal experience or observation. Third, reading. Young Jack who learns the reading habit early, who reads easily and has been taught to seek for himself information from books has taken the surest and shortest road to knowledge.

So it's up to all parents, who are interested in raising happy and successful boys or girls or both--and all teachers engaged in the same job--first to help them to learn the mechanics of reading early. Then, to supply them with good reading, all they need of it, to encourage the reading habit, but also to keep them away from objectionable or worthless books. One authority has said that very few books written for children are directly harmful, but that, oh! so many of them are undesirable.

Did you ever stop to watch the people buying in a bookstore or in the book section of a department store at this time of year? Did you ever notice those who were choosing books for children? Fond aunts and uncles perhaps, or friends, or even mothers and fathers. They generally ask for something interesting and not too expensive. If Uncle Jim, for example, is looking for a boy's book, the average salesman, who understands popular demand but not children's needs, will very likely bring out such a title as "The Boy Aviators on Bear Island." On the cover will probably be a vividly colored illustration of a boy coming down from a burning aeroplane in a parachute with his companions fighting off a grizzly bear who happens to be directly underneath.

"We happen to have these special boys' books at a bargain today," the salesman may say. "This series is only thirty-nine cents a volume. A real bargain. Just the thing for your young nephew. Adventure from cover to cover. This series is the most popular one we carry. We've sold over 500 copies in the last month."

The chances are that Uncle Jim will buy that book because it looks like a thriller to him and because he hears it's popular and cheap. But actually it may be expensive to the young reader who gets it. Expensive in wasted hours spent in reading it, in the false sense of reality he may receive from it, and in a loss in the education he would be getting from a good book--a book that he would find just as interesting, just as much fun to read, yet much more worthwhile.

"But," exclaimed one mother, "how am I to know which juvenile books are good and which are worthless?"

In other words, which books will make children good friends so are worth buying, and which ones will be worthless or harmful companions?

Here's a definition of a worthless book. It is one that leaves the child with nothing gained in information, inspiration or literary appreciation. Such a book may have a strong momentary appeal because of its story, or sentiment, mystery or adventure. But after reading, there's nothing of value left in the mind. Sometimes this poor type of reading is published in a series of twenty or more books for children full of the impossible, and unreal adventures of a single character or group of characters. You know the kind.-- stories full of sham heroism, but impossible athletic success or unreal school life.

Why do children read them? The psychologists explain that the child finds in such books the fulfillment of his daydreams and his subconscious wish to excel, to be popular, to lead his group or gang, to show heroism in a dangerous situation, or to display special physical prowess. Instead of getting out and learning how to succeed in real life, many children live their success out in reading such books. When the exploits of the hero are too impossible for reality, the results may be extremely harmful to the young reader. However, there are plenty of books that stimulate the child to useful activity by stories of what others have really accomplished. Reliable and interesting biographies of great men, for example. Such books are well worth while.

With girls, often it is the sentimental element in a book that makes it undesirable. Girls of twelve, thirteen and fourteen, one authority says, are especially inclined to seek their companions in books rather than in other human beings. Over-romantic, vapid, weak books fill these young readers with false conceptions of reality, so that they may come in time to live in a world of their own creating--a poor preparation for the day when they must face the world as it is.

In general the melodramatic, the sensation, or the sentimental book should be excluded from the child's list.

Of course, no child's reading taste can be arbitrarily formed. It won't pay to try to force him to read certain books and to forbid others. Strategy, tact, patience will win the day. Make him gifts of good and attractive books, books that appeal to his special hobby, like those on minerals and rocks, or realistic nature stories or animal tales. Once in the habit of good reading he will learn to discriminate between good and poor.

Now about the right kind of books for the child's library. You can select them on one or more of these four points:

First, do they set up worthy ideals of conduct and achievement that the child could actually follow in his own life?

Second, do they help him learn to appreciate the beautiful?

Third, do they add to his store of desirable knowledge?

Or fourth, do they arouse a desire for reading more good literature.

A book doesn't have to give information or to instruct to be desirable for children's reading. Of course, those books that deal with facts in an interesting way are most helpful. But so also are those that stimulate the child's imaginative qualities and that teach him an appreciation of the beautiful. The fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson, or Grimm or Howard Pyle; Van Dylé's "Story of the Other Wise Man", Mark Twain's "The Prince and the Pauper" and "Alice in Wonderland"--these are some of our best and finest literature though all fantastic and imaginative. Every child deserves to read for pure entertainment such fine samples of traditional fairy and folk tales and whimsical, fantastic stories.

By the way, the public library in your town has lists of good reading suitable for children of different ages. The librarian will be a great help in advising you about the right gift books for your children. Or you can write to the American Library Association, 520 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Time is almost up. Just a word more, though, to help you in selecting gifts of books for the children. The looks of the book are well worth considering. So is the type, the length and the illustrations. Any librarian or book seller today realizes the importance of attractive make-up in making the book a favorite with any youngster. Many a fine old classic is never sold or read by children because it has an ugly, dreary-looking binding and is printed in poor type. But just let it come out in a new edition with a bright, handsome cover, good paper, clear type and attractive illustrations and watch the children buy and read it. Clear and fairly large type, by the way, is not only more attractive and comfortable to read, but it also helps save children's eyes.

Then there's length to consider. Youngsters often find it hard to wade through books that are too long. Medium-size is best to hold the interest of older children. Short books are best for the younger ones.

Finally there's the matter of illustrations. All children like pictures and the younger the child the more he depends on them for his information and enjoyment. Good pictures appeal to the eye, make the story and the facts more real to the young reader, and stimulate his imagination. So the ideal child's book is always illustrated, and for young children, colored illustrations are best.

No time for a menu today, though I have a very nice one here for you. Can you wait until tomorrow? I promise to give you the menu and recipe first thing. We'll spend the rest of our time tomorrow on questions.

Friday, however, we'll again devote to the children. On Friday we'll talk about selecting Christmas toys.

