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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Eleanor Buelke

Bettelheim, Bruno

Surviving

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979. Pp. xi + 432.

This is a book written by a survivor *par excellence*. In it Dr. Bettelheim writes of themes that have occupied his mind and have been basis of his work since he survived the European holocaust of World War II. Those in education who have read and listened to this outstanding teacher-psychiatrist's expressions of his deep, caring, and enlightened knowledge of children and society will value this collection of his important essays.

In this volume, Bettelheim covers a variety of concerns. He philosophizes about the significance of life, and how humans deal with the battle to master its finiteness. From his own personal struggle to survive, he has learned that "all attempts to extract meaning from life are to a very large measure actually a projection of meaning into life . . . This can occur only when and to the degree that a person is able to find meaning within oneself . . ." However, he suggests repeatedly that how survivors deal with their later lives is directly related to the support they receive from others closest to them. Teachers can belong to the group of supportive "others closest" to children, and to members of their profession, helping to make a significant difference in all their lives. In the light of current, increased references and attention to teacher "burn out," and the destructive environments within which many educators have to work, what this author writes about survivorship is timely and appropriate.

The writer's descriptions dealing with individual and mass behavior in extreme situations say much to educators about the parallel between the concentration camp experiences and what happens to children destroyed by coldness, abandonment, and rejection. It also reinforces concerns about loss of self-respect and personal autonomy under oppressive powers of the state, or other administrations that use external power for extreme regimentation and conformity.

His discussion of education in its relationship to the reality principle may help teachers to clarify their understandings of failure in reaching and teaching many obviously normal, intelligent children. He suggests that learning will improve when teachers are not bound by their role-taking and personal anxieties, but, instead, consider what children are really like and why they act as they do. If children's worlds are at odds with education as represented by teacher and school, in order for them to give up the prejudices of their "own marketplace," they must be reached initially within the framework of their particular individual, or peer, mores. To do this, he says, will require "no unusually inspired teachers, but only ordinary ones who have been helped to understand what is going on."

Bettelheim addresses himself directly to teachers when he writes of violence and aggression that impede learning in the classroom. Children who experience strong anger and violent feelings often have little opportunity to discharge their emotions. Relieving hostility through vicarious

means in books and stories helps to free positive tendencies for the learning process. Writing about angry thoughts in words and terms that concern themselves deeply is an important step for children in learning to deal with things they fear.

Further, he says that self-chosen, emotionally charged words are easier for children to learn than innocuous, “nice” words, and he claims “. . . that the wish to express and master what is important is a powerful motivating force for learning to read and understand a word and thus the phenomenon to which it refers, pleasant or not . . .” He also suggests that dealing with violence through reading, writing, and thought may help children to cope with it in their lives with the smallest danger to themselves and those around them.

Bettelheim believes that there is an intimate connection between emotions and learning ability. He states that, “Assuming normal intelligence, only the severely disturbed child will have serious trouble learning to read . . . Failure to learn may, in fact, be chosen by some children as their way of surviving. If, to learn means to grow up, to become independent, perhaps, to lose the known security of parental and home care, the choice to fail may seem the safer path. When home environments and parental standards differ radically from school middle-class standards, opting for school learning failure may be a way of expressing loyalty and protection for them. Moreover, if children are convinced that their failure is inevitable within a given learning milieu, choosing not to learn at all will at least attract attention. Such attention may afford some measure of status and self-respect because children, themselves, have made the choice.

Children’s choices are made in response to the inner and outer worlds of those adults who are significant to them. If what these significant adults are teaching is perceived as “tool” learning, “something to be mastered and used only upon occasion,” such educational effort is apt to fail. Mastery of reading, for example, means nothing without some application; its perfection as a tool, in and of itself, will not automatically lead to scholarship. Furthermore, insistence upon mastery of meaningless operations may produce children who appear intellectually precocious, but who are really “emotionally, terribly immature.” Many people are in trouble today in their struggle to survive because at some point “too much was asked” of them and “too little was given.”

Except in times of trauma or trouble, wondering about the problems of life’s meaning and purpose do not particularly concern or oppress many people. For teachers who deal daily with the unique quality of life, its meaning for learning and for many learners besides themselves, ways to survive with confidence have major impact and importance. In education, surviving means recognition of what this author characterizes as the deepest and most important motive for learning:

The inner conviction of the uses of learning for oneself is what overcomes educational handicaps, even the most severe blocks to learning. For education to be such an inner liberating force, it must not be degraded to the position of a tool, but made the essence of personal growth and development.

Greta Rey

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Glazer, Joan I., and Gurney Williams III, *Introduction to Children's Literature*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979, 737 pp., \$15.95.

If this important new book has a weakness, it is the inadequacy of the title to convey the freshness and vitality with which the subject of children's literature is most thoroughly presented. In a very readable style, the authors live up to their promise to "convey (the) power and artistry (of children's books) in a way that will send many of our readers on a hunt for the actual books, or others like them."

The book is divided into two major sections. The chapters of Part One, "Exploring the Realm of Literature," define the universal truths of all literature and the specifics of children's literature. The first chapter, which alone makes the book a valuable acquisition, reviews children's growth and development as they apply to language and literature. Then, ingeniously using Marguerite de Angeli's *The Door in the Wall* to illustrate, it presents the elements of good literature so beautifully, that it could well serve one who had never had another literature course. The remaining chapters of this section each deal with a genre of children's books. In addition to analyzing the type, historical background is given, its value to and effect on children, and guidelines for choosing and evaluating the books. While the reader may delight in the pure elements of the literature for their own sake, the authors never let literature become a solely intellectual study separate from the children who will read it. Each chapter ends with a helpful summary, annotated bibliography, adult references, and children's book references. One of this book's many strengths is its organization.

Part Two, "Literature and Children Together," provides a wealth of material particularly useful for teachers-in-training, and as a revitalization for experienced teachers. These chapters deal with presenting literature to children, eliciting their thoughtful responses, and helping them increase their understanding and enjoyment of books, by utilizing just about every imaginable method of good teaching. Included is an excellent chapter on building units.

A distinctive feature of *Introduction to Children's Literature* is the use of numerous "Issues" boxes interspersed throughout the text. Consisting of one or two pages of quotations of two or more experts who have opposite opinions, they deal with the subjective issues of children's literature. These are followed by thought and discussion-provoking questions, useful for the college classroom.

The format of the book makes one want to pick it up, page through it, and own it—quite a feat, considering the vast quantity of material. The single columns offset by white space are attractively laid out with many illustrations from the children's books referred to in the text. An eight-page folio of colored plates accompanies the chapter on picture books.