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A Precious Legacy

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Abstract

One of the blessings of my childhood was the utter freedom in which I was left to explore, sample, and lose myself in books. Almost as soon as I could handle a book, my parents taught me how to open and use one properly. Books have become a part of me. I would be lost without them. They are a way of life for me. I wish this same freedom for all children today!

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Naturally, my favorite gift in childhood was a book. No birthday, no Christmas nor holiday was completely satisfactory unless my family and friends gave me several books. I treasured them and kept them in a book case in my own room. When my parents had callers or guests and I wished to be hospitable, I would take these friends by the hand and conduct them to my room to show them my library. Of course, I didn't have the beautifully illustrated editions in colors of Perrault's, Grimm's and Anderson's *Fairy Tales*; Andrew Lang's *Green, Red and Blue Fairy Books*; *Pilgrim's Progress*; *Greek Myths*; Bible Stories; *Beautiful Joe*; *Black Beauty*; *Treasure Island*, the Alcott books and the like that are available for youngsters today, but I showed my treasures then with as much pride and satisfaction as I would now if I were the owner of a Turner, Titian, or a Rembrandt. One Valentine's Day, I received a beautiful book plate with my own name on it. Nothing else could have pleased me so much for here was the proof that the books belong to me.

In many towns, years ago, public libraries did not have a special room with quantities of beautiful books for children, nor small reading tables, on which children's magazines invitingly lay, as they have now. Today, gay and attractive draperies, appropriate pictures, flowers, and the presence of a pleasant and understanding librarian act as a magic carpet to encourage a youngster to take a thrilling journey into a land of fact and fancy.

Yet I often wonder when I'm in a library whether parents fully appreciate the advantages of such a room, and the help it can be to their children in making books their unfailing friends. Of course, every member of the family should have his own library card. Recently, I heard a small girl ask her mother why she couldn't have a card so that she could take a book home. Her mother snapped, "Because you can't! Now stop fussing while I find the book that I want." Later, the librarian asked the mother why she didn't give her daughter permission to get a book. "Oh," she shrugged, "my daughter has so

many books at home now that they are all over the place.” Another mother standing near the desk complained, “John never thinks to bring his books back on time. I could almost buy them with the money that I pay out in fines.” Of course, such attitudes on the part of parents are short sighted. If John watches the librarian stamp the return date on the card, he will most likely remember to take the book back on time. He can be cautioned to return the book promptly for some other youngster will be waiting to read it. If John returns the book on time, he should be praised; if he does not, his parents should make him pay the fine out of his allowance.

A child can widen his world, increase his vocabulary, learn to use the English language accurately, and store up general, useful information by reading as many good books as he can be lured to read.

Children who are read to from babyhood, beginning with the Mother Goose jingles, are likely to become the best, natural readers. The youngsters whose parents enjoy reading and find time to read regularly and who discuss the books they love, are likely to find that their children with a little encouragement will follow their example and enjoy talking about their own books. However, in too many homes today books have been relegated to the attic, put away in boxes or behind closed doors; but when books or magazines are near at hand, children are likely to spend idle time in leafing through or reading them. Leaving a few books around the house which have been chosen because of the pulling power of the subject matter based on the particular interest of the children has often proved to be a satisfactory lure and has helped to develop the reading habit.

Television programs which could be profitable and delightful experiences in appreciating books and, sometimes are, often, alas debase and coarsen instead. Wise parents select the television programs that their children see with the same painstaking attention that they give to selecting their children's clothes and shoes. Few parents would deliberately feed their children harmful and inferior food, but the same parents by their apathy and preoccupation with their other interests allow their children to sit or lie on the floor by the television screen, hour after hour, absorbing the cheap, lurid, and debasing.

Parents who wonder how to entice their children into enjoyable educational activities will find it necessary to work out within the family a time schedule and a program for combining recreation and mental stimulus. If a family activity is abruptly substituted for a television program that their children have come to think of as “a must,” then the activity had better be a winner.

In my childhood after our Sunday evening lunch, our parents, my two brothers and I gathered around the fireplace for our weekly reading circle. At first, Father, who read very well, used material that was particularly suitable for the season or the holiday. O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi"; Dicken's *Chimes* or *Christmas Carol*; Lincoln Steffen's "A Miserable Merry Christmas" and Van Dyke's *The Other Wiseman* were a few of his choices that I still remember. Sometimes, he might choose favorite lines from one of Shakespeare's plays after he had read the plot from Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare* to us or had given us the background material. Lest we tire of too much serious material, Father would often surprise us with a chapter from *Peck's Bad Boy*. How we would chuckle when the bad boy outwitted the grocery man! "The Jumping Frog," *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Tom Sawyer* were not forgotten on father's literary menu. Mother liked poetry and biography. She often chose to read some narrative poems from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* or from Kipling's works. We heard *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* from her lips. I shall not soon forget how sympathetically she introduced us to Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*. I cannot recall when we first started receiving *The Youth's Companion*. I do remember that most of the spats that I had with my older brother originated over who would first open that magazine. Every week, we waged a battle royal until Father came home unexpectedly one day. After that disconcerting experience, we became not only auditors in the reading circle, but also found ourselves drafted participants in the programs as well. Father quickly assigned articles from the magazine for each of us to read on Sunday night. No one could misunderstand his directions. We were expected to do our best to entertain the other members of the family by making careful preparations. No one was to be bored. Of course, it was necessary for each of us to practice reading privately, and to be sure that we could pronounce all the words correctly. We were honor bound not to read someone else's assignment until after the circle meeting. For other, later programs, we took turns giving oral reports about books that we had recently read or magazine articles that we liked. When we were given the center of the floor while the rest of the family listened respectfully, the opportunity to speak unhampered could hardly fail to serve as an incentive. A time limit which we were expected to respect was set in advance. Often a spirited discussion followed the reading of the magazine articles or the book reports. A bowl of nuts, a batch of fudge, or apples and popcorn, which mother had previously prepared, made culture not only tolerable but lively

and enjoyable. In fact, nine o'clock came all too soon.

Through the years, the family reading circle has been one of my cherished memories. Yes, books and libraries may be and are a new world for many children—one that can give them something that war, misfortune, and poverty can never take away. Let us encourage and help them to find it through their very own books or from a well stocked children's library.

Louise J. Walker is Associate Professor Emeritus of Western Michigan University. Her students praise her many skills as a teacher. Louise Walker is the author of *Legend of Green Sky Hill*, *Red Indian Book*, and *Woodland Wigwams*.