

# The Value of Children's Literature

---

**By Martha Crippen**

Giving children access to all varieties of literature is extremely important for their success. Educators, parents, and community members should help students develop a love and passion for reading. Not only is reading literature important in developing cognitive skills to be able to succeed in a school or work setting, but it is valuable for other reasons as well. Although there are countless values in exposing children to literature, Donna Norton (2010) identifies the value of literature for young people in her book *Through the Eyes of a Child*. Children's literature is important because it provides students with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives students appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps students develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student's personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next.

The first value to note is that children's literature provides students with the opportunity to respond to literature and develop their own opinions about the topic. This strengthens the cognitive developmental domain as it encourages deeper thought about literature. Quality literature does not tell the reader everything he/she needs to know; it allows for some difference in opinion. One reader may take something completely different away from the piece of literature than the next reader, based on the two personal viewpoints and experiences. Students can learn to evaluate and analyze literature, as well as summarize and hypothesize about the topic. Norton says that for children, "wordless picture books are excellent stimuli for oral and written language" (2010, p. 9). Students reading wordless books like *A Ball for Daisy* (Raschka, 2011), *The Yellow Umbrella* (Liu, 1987), or *The Red Book* (Lehmann, 2004) will be able to analyze the illustrations and develop their own dialogue for the story. This strengthens students' cognitive functions in being able to form opinions on their own and to express themselves through language in summarizing the plot of a wordless book.

Second, children's literature provides an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. It is crucial for children to learn these values because, "developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development" (Norton, 2010, p. 3). In saying this, however, when teaching students about the cultural heritage of others, one should be very careful in selecting which books to recommend to young readers. There are many stories, some folktales, which contain blatant stereotypes and inaccuracies about certain cultural groups. This includes books such as *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (Jeffers, 1991), or *The Rough-Face Girl* (Martin, 1992). Both of these stories depict Native Americans in a misguided way and contain misinterpretations of what actually occurred in history. For example, the Iroquois tribe in *The Rough-Face Girl* (Martin, 1992) historically lived in longhouses, but the illustrator depicts these Native Americans as living in teepees. This is a clichéd view, and it can be very damaging in perpetuating stereotypes if we as adults are not cautious in the books we have in our classroom and home libraries. However, there are some children's books that are more accurate in teaching the cultural differences of others. A story called "Eric" from *Tales from Outer Suburbia* (Tan, 2009)

is a touching story about a family who takes in a foreign exchange student and must learn about their guest and accept the differences between their cultures. It has a positive message about encouraging acceptance of the cultural differences between people, which is something that we want to help nurture in our students. Another book that helps discuss culture is *Going Home* (Bunting, 1996), which is the story of a Mexican immigrant family with the children who were born in the U.S. There is a difference in what “home” is for the parents and the children, and when they take a trip to Mexico, the children realize how important their parent’s culture and homeland is for them. Many books are available that depict culture as an important piece of society that is to be treasured and valued, and those books can have great value for students.

Third, children’s literature helps students develop emotional intelligence. Stories have the power to promote emotional and moral development. Children’s literature “contains numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions,” an important skill for children to see modeled (Norton, 2010, p. 34). *Guji Guji* (Chen, 2004), for example, is a story about a crocodile who is adopted into a family of ducks. Ultimately he must choose between betraying his adopted family and going back to his own “species,” and he decides to remain true to his beliefs and not betray his family. *The Scar* (Moundlic, 2007) is an effective book to read with students in order to teach them about responding to grief, as it is about a boy whose mother dies. This requires a complex level of emotional intelligence, as many young children do not understand death. The topic of death would be more appropriate for an older grade level, but it is an important topic to discuss with students. Another book that encourages emotional intelligence is *Selma* (Bauer, 2002), which discusses what it takes for a young sheep to be happy. It is a philosophical story within a picture book, and challenges students to think about what happiness really is. *The Big Box* (Morrison, 1999) is a story about children who have their freedom taken away by being put into a box and the deeper problems that exist with not being given one’s freedom. Children’s literature encourages students to think deeper about their own feelings.

Children’s literature also encourages creativity. Norton stresses “the role that literature plays in nurturing and expanding the imagination” (2010, p. 4). *The House in the Night* (Swanson, 2008) depicts the creativity that a young girl has in her dreams at night, as she flies about the dark neighborhood on the wings of a bird. *The Amazing Pop-up Music Book* (Petty, 1999), *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin* (Moss, 1995), and *Look Closer: Art Masterpieces Through The Ages* (Desnoettes, 2006) are imaginative and original books that encourage students to learn about music and art, and they are engaging in their design and interactivity. Children’s literature promotes the development of students’ internal imaginations.

Children’s literature is of value because it fosters personality and social development. Children are very impressionable during the formative years, and children’s literature can help them develop into caring, intelligent, and friendly people. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget says that when students move from the pre-operational to the operational stage of cognitive development, they become less egocentric. Whereas students in preschool and kindergarten may be entirely focused on themselves, as students grow older they begin to take into account the feelings and viewpoints of others. Being able to understand other people’s viewpoints and to not be selfish are important skills that adults must nurture in children, as Norton says that “acceptable relationships require an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of others”

(2010, p. 27). Children's literature can foster social development by encouraging students to accept other people and their differences. Books like *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005), *Molly's Family* (Garden, 2004), *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Souza, 1989) and *Daddy's Roommate* (Wilhoite, 2000) present situations that might encourage students to become more open-minded to different types of families and understand that love is the most important thing in a family. Children's literature can also encourage students to develop relationships with people, encouraging social contact. An atypical friendship is depicted in *Loop the Loop* (Dugan, 1992), where a young child and an elderly person become good friends and share the common joy of playing with yo-yo's. In *A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever* (Frazee, 2008), the boys learn to think of the needs of others when they build a diorama for the grandpa who is fascinated with penguins. Literature encourages students to be considerate and friendly people, and these traits may be consistent with developing students into quality citizens.

Finally, children's literature is of value because it is a timeless tradition, one in which "books are the major means of transmitting our literary heritage from one generation to the next" (Norton, 2010, p. 3). Classic stories like Dr. Seuss' *And to Think That I Heard it on Mulberry Street* (Geisel, 1989) and *The Cat in the Hat* (Geisel, 1957) are important books to read to children because of their literary heritage. For a younger audience, children could build their cognitive and language skills through exposure to Mother Goose rhymes. One example of a good collection of these classic rhymes is *Hey Diddle Diddle and Other Mother Goose Rhymes* (dePaola, 1998). Children in older grades can learn to appreciate the classic plays and messages of William Shakespeare in picture books that aim to make the plays more accessible. Many versions of Shakespeare's works are available in abridged and picture book formats, including *Romeo and Juliet* (Coville, 1999) and *The Tempest* (Mayer, 2005). Children are only young for a short time, and so we must give them access to a basic literary heritage of timeless books. Quality children's literature has the great power to captivate audiences for many generations.

Children's literature is extremely valuable in both the school setting and at home. Teachers and parents should both be able to differentiate between quality and mediocre literature, in order to give students access to the best books to encourage these important values of literature and considering developmental domains. Children's literature is valuable in providing an opportunity to respond to literature, as well as cultural knowledge, emotional intelligence and creativity, social and personality development, and literature history to students across generations. Exposing children to quality literature can contribute to the creation of responsible, successful, and caring individuals.

## References

- Bauer, S. (2002). *Selma*. La Jolla, CA: Kane Miller Book Publishers, Inc.
- Bunting, E. (1996). *Going home*. NY: HarperCollins.
- Chen C – Y. (2004). *Guji Guji*. La Jolla, CA: Kane Miller Book Publishers, Inc.
- Coville, B., reteller, & Nolan, D. (1999). *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*. NY: Dial Books.

- dePaola, T., reteller. (1998). Hey diddle diddle and other Mother Goose rhymes. NY: Puffin.
- Desnoettes, C. (2006). Look closer: Art masterpieces through the ages. NY: Walker & Company.
- Dugan, B., & Stevenson, J. (1992). Loop the loop. NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Frazee, M. (2008). A couple of boys have the best week ever. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.
- Garden, N., & Wooding, S. (2004). Molly's family. NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Geisel, T. (1989). And to think I heard it on Mulberry Street. NY: Random House.
- Geisel, T. (1957). The cat in the hat. NY: Random House.
- Jeffers, S. (1991). Brother Eagle, Sister Sky. NY: Dial.
- Lehmann, B. (2004). The red book. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Liu, J. S. (1987). The yellow umbrella. La Jolla, CA: Kane Miller Book Pub.
- Martin, R., reteller, & Shannon, D. (1992). The rough-face girl. NY: G. P. Putnam Sons.
- Mayer, M., reteller, & Bywaters, L. (2005). William Shakespeare's the tempest. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.
- Morrison, T., & Potter, G. (1999). The big box. NY: Jump at the Sun.
- Moss, L., & Priceman, M. (1995). Zin! Zin! Zin! A violin. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Moundlic, C., & Tallec, O. (2007). The scar. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Newman, L., & Souza, D. (1989). Heather has two mommies. Boston, MA: Alyson Wonderland.
- Norton, D., & Norton, S. (2010). Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall.
- Parnell, P., Richardson, J., & Cole, H. (2005). And Tango makes three. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Petty, K., & Maizels, J. (1999). The amazing pop-up music book. NY: Dutton Children's Books.
- Raschka, C. (2011). A ball for Daisy. NY: Schwartz & Wade Books.
- Swanson, S. M., & Krommes, B. (2008). The house in the night. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, Co.
- Tan, S. (2009). Eric in S. Tan (2009), Tales from outer suburbia. NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Wilhoite, M. (2000). Daddy's roommate. Boston, MA: Alyson Wonderland.