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EC5524 A Good Book for you

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A GOOD BOOK FOR YOU

Mrs. Norma Kidd Green

"Tell me of a good book." "I've just read such a good book." "I wouldn't read that if I were you, it's not very good." I hear such remarks often and I expect you do, too, until we wonder sometimes just what a good book is. If each one of us would read the book designated as good or bad, we might wonder still more. In the last few years when I've talked about books to groups of people there is often some discussion and some one nearly always makes a remark like this- "Have you read----oh, that terrible book that every one talks about," I can always know that it is one of two or three books---books which many people have thought were very good and yet, which many people have said were "terrible."

So how are you going to know whether a book is "good" or not? Or is there a difference between a "good book" and "a good book for <u>you</u>."

There are, to be sure, certain qualities in common in the books which have endured through the years, qualities which are generally conceded to make them "good books." Altho there is sometimes slight disagreement as to just how these qualities may be described and as to which ones are the most important, still, it is possible to come to a general understanding of what they are and to establish a tentative set of rules for judging books.

I have liked the way these qualities are stated in THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN IN THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY by Luther Allen Weigle. It doesn't sound like a book that would have a discussion of reading but it is quickly seen that the subject is brought up because Mr. Weigle thinks that good reading is one of the things present in the finest families. His measure for judging a book consists of four parts---a good book must be true, it must have sound thinking clearly expressed, it must be a book of "power" and it must exert that power to worthy ends.

In the first place then---a book must be true. It should present a real picture of life. This may sound like a sweeping defense of complete realism. But there is more than one kind of realism. One sort goes to the extent of reproducing every detail as if on a photographic plate. No minute point is allowed to escape whether it has a bearing on the central theme or not. Such authors, for instance in describing a room almost make an inventory of it, while, in life itself, anyone entering a strange room seldom is conscious of all minute furnishings, especially if there are interesting people in the room or exciting events taking place. Some one has said that "literature is the cyanide process applied to experience for the extraction of truth." Most assuredly, not all experience is of value for this purpose, it is the privilege of the literary artist to select and arrange the details in order to bring forth the truth that he wishes to emphasize.

So we can see that being true does not necessarily mean the presentation of all detail, neither does it mean the ruling out of all creative imagination. The great artist builds imaginary situations, even fantastical situations which result in clear interpretations of life. Thus we may certainly accept as "true" some of the loved books occasionally classed as "fairy tales." Such a one is WIND OF THE WILLOWS by Kenneth Grahame. Here is a whole family book, to be enjoyed by both children and grown ups. It is the highly imaginative tale of a mole, a water rat, a badger and a toad. Children enjoy it for the adventures, the excitement of Toad's various escapades, while the grown ups see the animals as true pictures of human beings. Toad is above all the egotistical braggart, the rich young egotist, dashing around the highways, getting arrested, and generally bringing grief to his faithful friends. Mole is the quiet home loving person and Rat the philosophical naturalist. Only an adult who has learned the deepest meaning of home will quite catch the beauty of the chapter when Mole returns to his own domicle.

All through the wild adventures of ALICE IN WONDERLAND appear pointed comments on human nature which seem all the more forceful because of the setting of nonsense.

A more recent book, ROAD OF AGES by Robert Nathan, is called a fantasy. It presupposes that all the Jewish people of the world have been gathered into one great caravan and are being sent into exile in the Gobi desert. Yet through all this seemingly fantastical idea, the people remain very real people--love, hate, friendship and death continue to affect them quite as they affect you and your neighbors. So being real, as we want to consider it, means that the deepest values of life are presented as keen observers of life have found them.

To recommend a few which are preeminently true books one might mention for one, THE FORSYTE SAGA by John Galsworthy. The story is told that an American in London, one day saw a man on the street whom he thought he knew, but on approaching this person, found that he was mistaken. Not until he was back in his hotel, did he realize that he had seen the man on the street as Soames Forsyte. Galsworthy had made Soames Forsyte so real and so truly what middle class Englishmen are, that the American had seen in an actual man the perfect embodiment of an imaginery character.

Thackery's VANITY FAIR gives a picture of the social climber of all times, the hard little person forced to battle her way through life with small equipment save that of her own wits. Becky Sharp has existed in many ages and in many stations of life.

I was amused a year or so ago to have a minister remark in all seriousness and with apparent belief that he was stating a new and startling fact, that there is today a conflict between the generations. I wanted so much to ask him if he had ever read Turgenev's FATHERS AND SONS. This great Russian interprets the ever recurring conflict between generations, in a way, that makes it understandable to people of any nation or period of history.

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So much then for what we mean by a book being "true." Our next point is "sound thinking, clearly expressed." By "sound thinking" we mean that a book must be reasonable, must move in a more or less logical manner. The situations must present fact after fact until the plot evolves naturally from the combination of these facts. There must be sensible setting forth of motives to explain action. Characters must develop as a result of possible forces which act upon them. In one rather popular book of the year, a man is shown in the early part of the book as a cultured gentleman, moving acceptably in surroundings of both physical and spiritual beauty. In the last chapter in a moment of joy and solemnity the author says this man squeaked in excitement. It is almost inconceivable that a person of the character which has been built up through the book could behave so---it means a jarring note in the whole. Again in many books coincidence is often so over done in bringing the lovers together that it can hardly be called sound thinking.

The manner in which the thinking of a book, sound or otherwise, is presented, is what we generally call style. That may seem too simple a definition of a most controversial subject, but as Mr. Weigle puts it, sound thinking should be "clearly expressed."

Often we find sentences so twisted, with phrases so involved,so piled on each other that we have little idea of what it is all about by the time we reach the end of the sentence. This is hardly clear expression and cannot be classed as the best of style. Here is a bit from a recent best seller:

"She was on her way to R----, when she stopped suddenly before an old lady with long dark eyes and a face as white as alabaster who sat on a sofa."

For a wild moment you feel that maybe the face quite by itself was sitting on the sofa. At best the sofa becomes more important than the eyes and face, which is probably not what the author intended.

Or sometimes a manner of writing is so carefully correct, with every word and phrase so exact that the writing becomes more important than the thought. There may be a place for this sort of writing but it smacks of the literary exercise rather than acts as a medium for expressing ideas. Again we will find prose where the words seem to fit into each other without effort, belonging so perfectly with each other that the reading moves along smoothly and easily. The very choice of words enhance the emotion which is being evoked and the writing serves its purpose of expression and at the same time interprets the central theme.

In the introduction of STARS FELL ON ALABAMA, Carl Carmer is trying to create an atmosphere of the supernatural---

"All are sure, however, that once upon a time stars fell on Alabama, changing the land's destiny. What had been written in eternal symbols was thus erased--- and the region has existed ever since, unreal and fated, bound by a horoscope such as controls no other country."

How well chosen the words---"destiny," "fated," "horoscope"! How smoothly the sentences move along--with no rude breaks or misplaced phrases.

We sometimes talk of the time value of a word, meaning the time required in sounding it. This is very important in poetry and you can notice its force in prose if you read aloud. In the following paragraph from NOW IN NOVEMBER by Josephine Johnson, at first she speaks of a sense of confusion and the words have a quicker

time and then when telling of the perspective gained by time the words come with a slower cadance--one syllable words which seem to space themselves.

"Now in November I can see our years as a whole---This autumn is like both an end and a beginning to our lives, and those days which seemed confused with the blur of all things too near and too familiar are clear and strange now."

Often prose can be almost scaned in metrical feet as we do with poetry. You can do so with this last quoted paragraph. Lincoln's Gettysburg address is often given as an example of such poetical prose.

A NEST OF SIMPLE FOLK by Shean O'Faolain is a book of the last few years which is written in a most beautiful poetical manner. It is a story of Irish life and although the subject matter often deals with sordid things, the language maintains a certain mystical beauty.

Different types of writing require different styles and individuals acquire their personal manner of expression. It is fascinating to study these differences, to see what part is played by length of sentence, by choice of words and such details. If you notice some of these things as you read and try to see in what way they contribute to the clearness and to the forceful presentation of the thought, you will soon develop an "eye" for style and find that it will add to the enjoyment of your reading.

A book may be real, and may be clearly written but still not especially catch your attention or hold your interest. This brings us to our third point---"a book of power." That is, it must have color, warmth and life. It must be able to move you out of your own life until you live with that of the book. It should present a story or a group of facts that stir you to the depths. Some such books are MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION and A LANTERN IN HER HAND. One might add THE CHRIST OF THE INDIAN ROAD and many others. Anotole France expressed it when he said, "they trouble the souls and change the hearts of men." There are many books which do these things, sometimes they lack other qualities, but this thing of power can be so great that the book accomplishes things in spite of its faults. A book of power frequently is the sort which makes so universal an appeal that it transcends all boundaries of time or race and exerts its power on men of all ages.

But sometimes power is not used for the best purpose, so our fourth point is that it use its power to worthy ends. In other words that the great ideals be presented. To be sure a book might be great in all other ways, sometimes so great that a certain grace might be allowed on this point, but how much more powerful when this point is added. There are many books to think of in this light, IDA ELIZABETH by Sigrid Unset, with its demand for faithfulness to a responsibility that has been assumed; SUNSHINE PREFERRED by Anne Ellis with an atmosphere of persistant courage in face of all discouragement. I would mention too, WINDOWS ON HENRY STREET by Lillian Wald which over and over puts forth the idea that "all men are brother." She says the things which make people alike are more important than the things that make them different.

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In the matter of exerting power we must not forget the use of satire; for a laugh often accomplishes things when serious argument fails. Very frequently, too, the great humorous books are also forcefully written and possessed of the finest realism.

Few books have all of these things, some have style and lack the finest truth, some tell a powerful story and tell it in a haphazard fashion. The book from which I took the sentence of poor construction presents a story of such sincerity and force with characters so real and so admirable that it has been hailed with delight by many people.

There are those of exquisite style, every sentence so beautifully turned that no fault could be found but which exert their power to unworthy ends or which have no message of any meaning to present. They are as weak as the sugary, poorly written book which does present high ideals--it is sometimes doubtful as to which is the least desirable.

Those books which possess one or two of these qualities in a very marked degree will, no doubt, have a wide appeal, those which have them all and to a great degree, are assuredly the mighty books of the ages.

These things may give us something to go on as to what makes up a "good" book. With practice and development of discernment in reading you can say that a book is true or has good style, is powerful or of high ideals---but does it always follow that it is a "good book for <u>you</u>"? Let me present some ideas here. It has been said--

"A good book for you enriches your life, by developing your mind, widening your experience or enlarging your sympathies."

Now that is entirely a personal matter. My experience may need widening in a different direction from yours. My mind may need development in a very different way. My whole accumulation of associations and prejudices may turn my sympathies and the need of their enlargement in a very different direction. So you see that it might be quite difficult for me to say what would be a good book for someone I do not know at all. Anne Byrd Payson, one night feeling bitter and alone, picked up E. Stanley Jones' CHRIST OF THE INDIAN ROAD and her life was made over. That at the time was the "good book" for <u>her</u>. Others have read it, admired it, but not found it to speak so intimately to them. It may be a poem, a novel, a book of travel, a biography, a treatise on economics or history, but if only a few words speak a message that in some way enriches your life--that is a <u>good</u> book for <u>you</u>.

You can, no doubt, find many such books. We all need more developed minds, wider experiences, and enlarged sympathies, and the hosts of books are ready to be tried and to prove their value to you.

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