

Life Lessons from Literature

The young father clutched the book anxiously as he waited in line at the public library. Unable to escape my own curiosity, I read the title, which was something like “Miss Susie Talks about Minding Your Parents.” “My little girl!” the man sputtered. “We just can’t get her to mind!”

This well-meaning dad was on the right track. I just question his choice of books.

What I wanted to say to him first was this: Congratulations on figuring out that reading to your daughter will provide opportunities to learn some life lessons.

The second thing I wanted to say was this: Run, do not walk, back to the storybook section of the children’s library. Grab some version of Little Red Riding Hood or The Tale of Peter Rabbit. These two classic tales of suspense will teach your daughter more about the value of minding her parents than the book in your hand ever will.

Conscientious parents flock to preachy, narrowly-focused books in their attempts to instill values. Here’s the problem: Children see right through these books. The obvious choice may be too obvious after all. There is nothing in these books to ignite the imagination.

These books attempt to teach a lesson, but they don’t capture the hearts and minds of children. They are lessons posing as literature. No self-respecting child will ask to have read again and again a book that hits him over the head like a hammer.

Instead, parents and children who read great stories together establish a common culture. This culture includes deeply held values and lessons richly taught by stories’ characters.

A child who is throwing temper tantrums may see herself in Maurice Sendak’s “Where the Wild Things Are.”

A child who struggles with sharing will learn as he laughs out loud at Mo Willems’ “Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog” or Michael Rosen’s “This is Our House.”

It’s as if a steady diet of good stories inoculates children to some extent against potential problems in behavior. Humor especially makes the medicine more palatable. Kevin Henkes is a master. His “Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse” will have children giggling at Lilly as they learn about avoiding trouble at school.

Even parents can appreciate a dose of bibliotherapy from children’s books. Overprotective parents may see themselves—and laugh—when they read Denis Roche’s “Little Pig is Capable.” Overwhelmed parents are comforted to learn

they are not alone when they read “Mama, Coming and Going” by Judith Caseley.

Ernest Hemmingway once wrote that “Good fiction is truer than if it really happened.” Well-written children’s stories have the ring of truth to them, and children can apply them to their own lives. The very best ones not only teach; they also curl up in our hearts where they help us become who we are.