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THE ROOTS OF RESPONSE TO LITERATURE*

Susan Tchudi

When my daughter Emily, now fourteen years old, was in second grade, she was assigned to read a story about a lion who fell in love with a princess. When the lion went to the princess's father to ask to marry her, the sly king, fearful of the lion's power, and only feigning concern for his daughter, convinced the lion that only if the lion removed his teeth and claws would the king feel that his daughter was safe with the beast. Reluctantly the lion complied, only to have the king laugh at him for his stupidity in believing that a princess could ever marry a lion. At the end of the story were questions to be answered (from literal to inferential, in the manner of a school lesson), but Emily was in no condition to answer them. Instead, she went to her teacher sobbing, "Why do people write stories like this?" Her overwhelming sense of fair play and her sympathy for the betrayed lion distracted her from the academic task at hand.

In her book *Children's Minds*, Margaret Donaldson (1978) asserts that children operate most effectively in situations that make human sense to them. She cites the work of Colwyn Trevarthan who believes that "early interpersonal responsiveness is the source from which the whole of human intelligence springs" (23). From infancy, Emily's experiences with literature were a piece with her experiences with life; literature was for us an extension and a reflection of direct experience of living--not an artifact to be studied or a mere pastime.

As a parent (and therefore, a "teacher"), I am influencing how my children will respond to life and to literature. How I live, what I say, how I

interact with others (both verbally and nonverbally) affect my children from the day they are born. Many of my values are conscious and I try to teach them to my children directly and indirectly. I want them to have a sense of justice and fair play; I want them to be sensitive to feelings, their own and others, and I want them to make decisions taking those feelings into consideration; I want them to know that the world is a rich and fascinating and beautiful place; I want them to have a sense of their own worth and integrity as individuals and to know the value of each other human being; I want them to have an appreciation for the gifts they have--their safety, their security, their talents, their health; I want their minds to be free and rich and imaginative; I want them to have a sense of humor.

So, in my interactions with my preschoolers, as we're engaged in the business of our day, I am reflecting in my actions and in my language what I value. I point out birds in trees, the sounds of trains and sirens, the leaves after it rains, the silly cat sleeping with her paws hung over the arm of the chair, the worm holes in the cherries, the dead squirrel in the middle of the road; I explain to a not-very-self-controlled-baby Christopher why he can't bite Michael (it hurts) and to Michael why he can't hit Christopher back (it hurts) and why Emily is crying over the accidental death of a school friend (another kind of hurt). I answer questions about why I peel carrots, why cars have different kinds of hubcaps, what makes lightning, why we brush our teeth, why we can't eat too many sweets, and why Andrew has to go home if he keeps pounding on the other kids. I explain why there's a picture of Miss Piggy on the Cheerios box and what the words say on street signs and what the skull and crossbones means on a box in the garage. We sing silly songs

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and Daddy's barbershop songs and make up our own words. Anyone who has ever cared for a preschooler can continue the catalogue of intriguing minutiae that attract the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of one getting control over the environment. James Britton's observations that all of life is afloat on a sea of talk is true in spades with preschoolers.

Although my values and interests dominate in the children's infancy, as the child grows, the situation becomes less and less one-sided. With my one-and-a-half year old I do most of the talking. (Michael has also taken on the job of interpreting the world for Chris.) I talk about how pretty the flowers are, how much laundry I have to do, what a muggy day it is, what we have to get when we go to the store, what fun we're having in the sandbox. With my four-and-a-half year old there is much greater interaction, with both of us asking and answering questions, making observations, expressing opinions.

What I do when I read literature to my children is an extension of our daily living. When Michael was younger, I did most of the buying, selecting what we read. As he has matured, he has done more of the selecting. In the past, I read books, pointed at the pictures, chatted about what was interesting, "ooh"ed and "aah"ed over pages with pretty pictures and "uh oh"ed when there were disasters. Now much of the commentary has been taken over by Michael. First commentary was likely to be in response to pictures. He asked questions about what was going on in a picture, what the motives and intentions of characters were, why they had that look on their faces. Later commentary began to focus on language.

For preschoolers, pictures supply the bridge between what they know about life and how they respond to language. In real-life situations, the event or the physical reality supplies part of the meaning; my tone of voice, my facial expressions, and my gestures supply another part of the meaning; and the language that I use supplies the final part of the meaning. In reading literature to my children, their response to the literature is influenced by several things: the pictures in the book, the language of the book, my expressions (voice, face), and

my commentary.

In early response to literature, then, the elements of response are much the same as the elements of response to life. Not only do children learn what words mean through the complex relationship of pictures, words, adult nonverbal behavior, and adult commentary, but they learn a range of thoughts and feelings that the adult attaches to the literary experience. They learn what the adult attends to, and as in life, they are being modeled a way or ways of responding to literature. Gradually, the child's values and interests emerge and his or her language grows, and the interaction then is among book, adult-reader, and child-reader, each constructing part of the meaning of the literary experience.

Maturity, then, is one variable that influences whether the focus is on the picture, on the language, or on the reaction of the readers to those elements. The purpose or the function of the story also influences who does more of the talking, how much talking is done, how much the pictures attract attention, and how much the focus is on language. By way of illustration, let me describe how Michael and I read some of his favorite books together.

One of Michael's recent acquisitions, **The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash** (by Trinka Hakes Noble, pictures by Steven Kellogg), strikes his fancy, I believe, because a group of ordinary children like himself become involved in an extravagant series of events on a field trip to a farm. In this book, Michael focuses on pictures (also extravagant) and roars with laughter at pigs raiding a school bus and eating kids' lunches--sandwiches, cookies, fruit, and thermos bottles flying. "Look at that egg in her face." "The chicken is on the teacher's head," he laughs. Though I enjoy the silliness, his relish of pie-in-the-face chaos is a clear inheritance from his father. When I first read the book I pointed out some of the events in the very detailed illustrations. Now he discovers new humorous details with every reading.

In Susanna Gretz's **The Bears Who Went to the Seaside**, a more "realistic" book, Michael is responding to a group of characters he is familiar with from other stories. (It's very interesting to me that

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the **species** of the characters in no way influences the sense of whether or not a book seems real. These bears are "like us.") Mainly a catalogue of experiences the bears have at the seaside, the book prompts in Michael a curiosity about how the bears feel about their trip. A picture of William after he has eaten fifteen fish used to make Michael ask why he looks so funny. Now he makes the connection between words and pictures and comments on how sick William is from eating so many fish. Michael has also learned through the words in the book that John is greatly attached to the sand castle he has spent two days building, so when the dog Fred goes running through the castle, Michael usually has some sad commentary or an "uh oh" to make on John's behalf. At one page, Michael always asks why the bears have tied a fish skeleton to the top of their tent pole. There is no mention of it in the text and I have no answer for it, so we often wonder over that page of the book together.

The Bear's Bicycle (by Emilie Warren McLeod, illustrated by David McPhail) is a book which, though I have read it to Michael for nearly two years, he has just begun to appreciate in terms of the relationship between the language and the pictures. The narration done by a little boy is simply a series of statements of the rules he follows in riding his bike. The humor of the book, however, is developed by the boy's teddy bear who miraculously becomes full-sized, actually hulking, to accompany the boy on his ride, disobeying--with disastrous results--every rule the boy follows. When we first began to read the book, I would read the rule and then ask, "What's the bear doing?" or say, "Look at that crazy bear." When he was two, Michael seemed content to have the book read and look at the pictures with no sense of the incongruousness (that I could detect): no laughter, no questions. Now he laughs as we read and makes commentary on the bear bumping into the car door and "really speeding" down a hill.

Another book that Michael is growing to appreciate is **Riddles for a Scary Night** (by Peter Desberg and Gloria Miklowitz, pictures by Laurie Burruss). This is another book where the progression of his response has been interesting to follow.

Like many children, Michael is intrigued by ghosts, witches, monsters, and skeletons. And like all children, much of his time is spent in figuring out what's real and what isn't. "Is there such a thing as skeletons?" "Well, yes, but they don't hang around on street corners." "Is there such a thing as ghosts?" "No...but some people believe there is a spiritual world." (My values at work, training the imagination, recognition of others' views, openness to metaphysical questions--some questions aren't so easy to answer.) "But no, there are no such things as ghosts." So, I think his early interest in **Riddles** was tied to his fascination with creatures. Certainly he couldn't understand the puns or the riddles. Last winter **one** of the riddles caught his fancy: Question: What does one angry skeleton say to another? Answer: I've got a bone to pick with you. For weeks he went around telling that riddle to everyone. I'm not sure what he was doing with it. "I've got a bone to pick with you" was certainly not a part of his repertoire of idioms. But something about skeletons and bonepicking appealed to him, something in the words, if not our particular sense of the play on words. At this point he can tell the answer to every riddle in the book, each one a pun or play on words and most, if not all, of them perceived differently from the way an adult would perceive them. Something in the language itself is meaningful to him, but that's a mystery I haven't cracked.

I think too often we assume, as adults, that children's responses are the same as ours--unless they ask questions or show some signs of confusion. Another of our longtime favorites--I have learned very recently--is very differently perceived by Michael and me. I have always liked **Nothing Ever Happens on My Block** (by Ellen Raskin), because it illustrates one of my favorite principles. In it the little boy narrator wishes his block were more interesting while around him there is wild activity: witches living in an old mansion, a fire and a rebuilding, a parachute drop, a tree growing from a twig to a home for birds, an armored car crashing and sending money flying, and so forth. As I often tell my children when they complain: "If you're bored, it says more about you than it does about the

world." I thought that message came through loud and clear in the book, but recently Michael came to me and asked about the main character, "Why is he looking out?" (out from the page--he faces away from the action throughout the story). "He's not paying attention to anything going on around him," I answered. "Why is he sitting there?" Michael persisted. (I was a little irritated he hadn't gotten the message.) "Because he's boring," I said. Michael thumbed through to the end of the book where fifty dollar bills are floating through the air and all of the characters who have appeared in the book are on the scene to capture the money. Michael's perception? "Everybody's getting the money. Everybody but Chester. Chester hates money." Nope. Michael doesn't have the message. But he likes the book.

In many cases I have only a partial clue about Michael's response to a book. I bought Maurice Sendak's **Outside Over There** for Michael when he was two-and-a-half because the book is so beautiful. My experiences with Sendak had taught me that he taps into unconscious feelings about power and fear and jealousy and anger that are sometimes difficult to verbalize. I didn't know if Michael--at such a young age--would have anything to say. But I was surprised that he wouldn't have anything to do with the book. At that point, I was still making many of the selections, and he would sit on my lap and listen to anything, and though he often had preferences about what he wanted to read, he had never rejected a book before. He simply would not ever let us read it. And of course, I never forced the issue when he said, "No, not that one." Over a year later when he tried it, he looked and listened but didn't talk about it. We read it occasionally now, but it's not one he brings me to read, and he never has anything to say about it. I point out the intricacies of the pictures, but it's not a book that's easily paraphrased or explicated. It is a part of our literary experience.

In some cases our responses to literature are at odds. For example, one of Michael's favorite books is **Space Case**, but he has to beg people to read it. None of his readers-- Emily, Daddy, nor I--can stand it (we all find it pointless and lacking in interesting events and

language), but he continues to choose it, despite our not so subtle responses, "Michael, this book is so stupid." (We're a household of strong personalities.) Neither am I eager to read the Barbapapa books of which he is so fond. I, on the other hand, really enjoy his National Geographic animal picture books and suggest them frequently. He is less than enthusiastic.

We have scores of books in our house. Some of them Michael wants read over and over. Some we have read only once. Some we both love (though obviously not for the same reasons). Some I choose and he tolerates my choice (having a story read that you kind of like is better than no story at all) and vice versa. Michael's tastes in literature are developing in the same way his tastes in food and toys are developing. No matter how much I tell him that broccoli is wonderful and no matter how much I model that by enthusiastically eating it myself, and no matter how often I insist he take a tiny bite to make **sure** he doesn't like it, he still resists eating broccoli (though he eats carrots and peas and corn). And no matter how much fun I say that puzzles are and no matter how I enjoy putting one together, he still prefers his Legos (in ways, a much more complex and creative and demanding activity). Michael has literary taste. He loves books, but not the same ones I love, necessarily.

Emily, the fourteen-year-old whose experience I described at the beginning of this piece, learned literature as experience rather than literature as artifact as she was growing up. To hold onto literature as meaningful experience she has had to separate her notions of school reading and her own reading (I won't say "reading for pleasure," because though her reading is obviously satisfying, it is a deeper experience than the word "pleasure" implies). She does well with her school reading; she can answer all the questions, but that's not where she lives. Fortunately, she has encountered librarians and friends who feed her eagerness and appetite of two to four novels a week. Without the help of her schooling, she discovered by the age of twelve not only current writers of young people's literature--among them L'Engle, C.S. Lewis, Aiken, Hinton,

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Danzinger, Konigsburg, Kerr, Cormier--but also many authors of classics--Dickens, Austen, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence. I am sure that she does not understand all of the language and subtleties of **Great Expectations**, **Pride and Prejudice**, **Return of the Native**, and **The Virgin and the Gypsy**, just as Michael doesn't understand all of the subtleties of the puns in his riddle book. But when she comes to me and says, "Mom, listen to this," and reads me a passage in which the words have captivated her or when I happen into her room and find her weeping over a book, I feel quite confident about her growth as a reader and as a human being. Like Michael, Emily doesn't read all kinds of literature, all authors suggested to her. Am I worried?

To sum up, both directly and indirectly parents and teachers present values to children. By what they say, by what they do, by what they demand and expect of children, they demonstrate what they value and what they want children to value. Certainly part of our responsibility is to provide children with a sense of what's important. At the same

time, while I want my children (and my students) to value certain things (and be like me), I also recognize the complexity and integrity of the individual. In some ways (and one who hangs around mothers hears this a lot), children are going to grow as they grow. They will develop idiosyncrasies, interests, and passions from the genetic pool and the infinitely complex environment that make up their beings. And though I present this as a fait accompli I see it as one of the elements that makes parenting and teaching so wonderfully unpredictable and interesting.

Response is rooted in human situations which allow the child to experience literature as a part of his or her social interactions. As adults, we begin by sharing our view of the world through our actions and language that accompanies our actions. We do likewise in our treatment of literature. As young children mature, their own language and their own values emerge and develop. The interaction of our values--children's and adults'--can lead to the richest of experiences--for us and for them.

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