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Guest Editorial

Alfred Slote

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GUEST EDITORIAL... Alfred Slote

Mr. Sloat is an author of children's books including *LOVE...AND TENNIS*, recently published by MacMillan.

It's probably a mistake to invite an author to write an editorial in a reading journal. I've often thought that authors and reading specialists lived in different worlds, and I had confirmation of that last summer when I talked to a library science class at the University of Michigan.

I arrived ten minutes early, sat in the back of the class, and listened to two young librarians review the latest batch of children's book for their colleagues.

"This book is a good introduction to a unit on the middle ages..."

"This is a good introduction to a unit on family relationships..."

And on it went with more and more units coming along: divorce, China, ecology, oil, ancient Rome, explorers, Arabs, animals...I never knew so many books had been written; I never knew so many units had to be introduced.

What I did know was that something important was missing. They seemed hardly to be talking about what I thought books were about: a literary experience. Language worth reading. Words that could get you excited, give you goose pimples.

When my time to talk came I got up and said I missed that kind of talk. A stony silence greeted me.

Which, I guess, greets any out-

sider (and what is a writer but an outsider?) who gets us to tell people how they should go about their business.

I've thought about this some and I think perhaps this is all part of the larger utilitarian approach to literature. We live in a time when people are desperate to solve problems, problems of communication, loving, parenting, childrening, race relations, emotions,...etc. And so books have joined the encounter groups, marriage relations groups...Books will make you better, books will help you cope.

It's bunk, of course. Books are not useful. The better the book, the less useful. Books don't change behavior. The Communist Manifesto never made anyone a communist.

Books are experiences. And a great book is a great experience, an experience that can ennoble. It en-

nobles, to quote Chekhov, "by teaching your heart to ache for what your eye cannot see."

These are the uses of imagination. It's out of imaginative literature that we can draw sustenance to endure everyday life. My ideal present for a kid whose father and mother are getting divorced or whose 14-year-old sister is pregnant, or whose best friend is a junior high school burn-out, is *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*.

There is only a thin line between escape and ennoblement, but it runs deep and it is defined by the creative imagination and the good writing that makes a good story endure. Good books outlive social problems.

So let's have no more touting of books as intros to teaching units -- either that, or don't let authors come early to library science classes.

