

Choosing Children's Books

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In the Introduction to her award-winning book, *The Little Backroom*, Eleanor Farjeon speaks of the magical dusty little attic full of books and cobwebs, with the sunlight filtering in occasionally, in her childhood home that inspired her to set off on a lifelong journey of reading and writing. Not many of us are as fortunate as Farjeon to inherit a 'Little Bookroom' with all its treasures, during our childhood. Books are either leather-bound volumes high up on the wall or the very practical and workable almanacs or school textbooks belonging to elder siblings stacked in some obscure corner, waiting to be sold off as junk.

Perhaps things are better these days, with many parents taking a keen interest in the upbringing of their children. But even then the question remains as to how many children are allowed to pick the books -| they actually want to read, as opposed to the ones that are forced on them. I remember a childhood friend whose parents usually hid away the 'storybooks' she received as birthday gifts, as they were worried those would lead her to neglect her school textbooks. There are also parents, who insist on choosing every book that their child reads, though it often leads to questions like 'Please give me a book that would be fit for a 10 year old' being asked at a bookstore. And anything a child picks up has to pass the censorial gaze of the parents/ guardians.

I had a chance to visit the children's book festival, Bookaroo, in Delhi last November and as I was flipping through the books several comments like 'Beta, you are too old/ young to read this', 'This book has too much text/ illustrations', 'I loved this book when I was your age!', 'You just want to buy it, you won't ever read it!', kept drifting into my ears. Instances like these make one wonder what the reasons behind this intellectual policing might be. The primary reason is, of course, that our parents are perpetually worried that the child might pick up something 'inappropriate'. However, if one asks them about the guidelines by which they select appropriate material (which I did) one usually receives very vague replies. Does this mean that this entire business of picking up books is founded on the assumption that (i) the parents 'know' what is good for the child, (ii) this is one way of asserting the fact that the parents always have the right to decide what happens in the child's life/ mind, and how s/he is nurtured? Can we really accept the most intriguing assumption that 'Parents know all'?

This trend would not have been a cause of concern if this applied only to very young children, but unfortunately many of our parents often tend to forget that the child is growing up, and with age, s/he should be allowed to decide what s/he wants to read. Thus, this way parents (often unconsciously) make sure that the child becomes the agent through whom they meet their own unfulfilled wishes and expectations, and this is a dangerous trend as this way the child often ends up living the unfulfilled life of the parents! Worse still, children often turn away from books forever, even if s/he might have enjoyed at some point of time.

It is time parents stopped pretending that books build character, and stories with morals help children acquire the lessons from all the experience acquired by humanity since the time of Aesop and Vishnu Sarma. Very few sane kids actually care to look at the morals

presented in a box in bold fonts at the top of these didactic tales. They are usually more interested in trying to figure out what happens to the cunning fox or the good farmer at the end. After all, very few children ever learn from the experiences of other people. And it is stupid of us to expect that, especially when we, adults, refuse to learn from our own mistakes and experiences!

Also the idea that everyone must read is dangerously fallacious! A large chunk of any discussion on the reading habits of children today usually deal with how distractions like the television, the internet, computer games and so on, prevent him/her from becoming a reader. One really needs to examine this statement both culturally and historically. In an interview Ruskin Bond says that even during his childhood when the only distractions were the radio and an occasional western movie at a theatre far off, it was only some three or four boys in his class that enjoyed spending time with books. This could serve as a wonderful advice for the all the over-enthusiastic anxious parents who want to make sure their children turn out to be readers. We should stop shoving books down the throats of our children. It would be best to let them free in a little book room so that the children can pick up whatever they feel like without having to look up at their parents' faces for approval, and also leave the door open, so that the child can come out, and perhaps also go in again, when s/he chooses to.

Finally, don't we moralise too much when it comes to the act of reading? Have we ever cared to bother about the biases and prejudices we betray when we assume that reading is a more fruitful exercise, while trying to make something out of a lump of clay, or playing strategy games at the computer, are not?

