



Cayuga Sunlight, Woodcut by Leonard Hutchinson

IMAGINATION, READING AND THE WORLD OF THE CHILD

Michael Katz

DEVELOPMENTAL psychology has determined that the human facility for language is wired into our consciousness, an organic part of human growth. It is well established that we should read to our children even before they can speak. Somehow the infant processes stories that she cannot fully comprehend, in the same way that she begins to make sense of the shapes and people that surround her.

Picture books can become an important part of the child's maturation process. Firstly, the book is an object, an intermediary between mother or father, grandmother or grandfather, and child. Most importantly, the picture book provides a link in imagination between the reader and the child. The grandmother who reads the story and the child who is being read to both see the same pictures and in a sense are transported by the visual cues to a similar place in the imagination. The book itself provides not only a coherent narrative, but also because of the accompanying pictures, an assurance to the child that the attention of her imagination rests in a similar place as the grandmother who is reading to her.

Children like to hear a story being read over and over. If one word is changed the child becomes distressed. What this shows is that the child needs to enter a familiar narrative, the faculty of imagination is in the developmental stage whereby the child needs to be assured that she is entering a familiar territory. Like foraging a path in the primeval forest, which needs constant treading and retreading to prevent it being overgrown, the child needs to enter a familiar place in the imagination, over and over, in order to be assured that she is in the same imaginary universe.

Artists and writers of picture books must be able to secure a place in this imaginary landscape that a child is willing to enter and explore with confidence. The art work must feel familiar to the child while at the same time challenging her curiosity. As well, it must not intimidate her willingness to enter new uncharted experience. The bedtime story experience is so important to a child because she is being encouraged to explore a new place in the imagination in a comfortable surround with a person she loves. Remember that soon a child will be falling asleep, losing herself in a dream world that she cannot control. The picture book, predictable in a way, al-

lows the child to enter an imaginary world while still being conscious of the people and places of her real life at the same time.

Eventually the child who is regularly being read to will want to be able to read the books herself. Wanting to read, she is readily taught how to read. Of course, being able to read takes an effort. By learning how to read, the child is rewarded by a sense of accomplishment (as taking her first steps, as speaking her first words) as well as by being able to continue for herself the adventure of reading and exploring worlds of fact and fiction that people in every corner of the world have collaborated to create.

The writer and artist must be able to enter the child's world in order to create a work that is comprehensible to the child, captures her interest and challenges her to construct new places in this strange and wonderful world of the imagination where she will feel safe. The reader of books to young children should try to make sure that she and the child are in a similar place on the map of the imagination. One way to do this is to discuss the pictures with the child. For very young children you may ask them, "Where is the duck? Where is the egg? Do you see the man on the horse? What is the boy doing?" This helps to make sure that both the reader and the child being read to are in real communication.

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