

Is It Good Enough for Children?

by MADELEINE L'ENGLE

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, WHEN I was teaching a course on techniques of fiction, a young woman came up to me and said, “I do hope you’re going to teach us something about writing for children, because that’s why I’m taking this course.”

“What have I been teaching you?” I asked her. “Well -- writing.”

“Don’t you write when you write for children?”

“Yes, but-isn’t it different?”

No, I assured her, it isn’t different. The techniques of fiction are the techniques of fiction, and they hold as true for Beatrix Potter as they do for Dostoevsky.

But the idea that writing for children isn’t the same as writing for adults is prevalent indeed, and usually goes along with the conviction that it isn’t quite as good. If you’re a good enough writer for adults, the implication is, or course, you don’t write for children. You write for children only when you can’t make it in the real world, because writing for children is easier.

Wrong, wrong, wrong!

I had written several regular trade novels before a publisher asked me to write about Swiss boarding school experiences.

Nobody had told me that you write differently when you write for children, so I didn’t. I just wrote the best book I possibly

could; it was called *And Both Were Young*. After that, I wrote *Camilla*, which was reissued as a Young Adult novel, and then *Meet the Austins*. It’s hard today for me to understand that this simple little book had a very hard time finding a publisher, because it’s about a death, and how an ordinary family reacts to that death. Death at that time was taboo. Children weren’t supposed to know about it. I had a couple of offers of publication if I’d take the death out. But the reaction of the family -- children as well as the parents -- to the death was the core of the book.

Nowadays what we offer children makes *Meet the Austins* seem pale, and on the whole, I think that’s just as well, because children know a lot more than most grown-ups give them credit for. *Meet the Austins* came out of my own family’s experience with several deaths. To have tried to hide those deaths from our children would have been blind stupidity. All hiding does is to confuse children and add to their fears. It is not subject matter that should be taboo, but the way it is handled.

A number of years ago -- the first year I was actually making reasonable money from my writing -- my sister-in-law was visiting us, and when my husband told her how much I had earned that year, she was impressed and commented. “And to think most people would have had to work so hard for that!”

Well, it is work, it's most certainly work; wonderful work, but work. Revision, revision, revision. Long hours spent not only in the actual writing, but in research. I think the best thing I learned in college was how to do research, so that I could go right on studying after I graduated.

Of course, it is not *only* work; it is work that makes the incomprehensible comprehensible. Leonard Bernstein said that for him music was cosmos in chaos. That is true for writing a story, too. Aristotle wrote that what is plausible and impossible is better than what is possible and implausible.

That means that story must be true, not necessarily *factual*, but true. This is not easy for a lot of people to understand. When I was a child, one of my teachers accused me of telling a story. She was not complementing me on my fertile imagination; she was accusing me of telling a lie.

Facts are fine; we need facts. But story takes us to a world that is beyond facts, out on the other side of facts. And there is considerable fear of this world.

THE WRITER Keith Miller told me of a young woman who was determined that her three pre-school children were going to grow up in the real world. She was not, she vowed, going to sully their minds with myth, fantasy, fairy tales. They were going to know the truth -- and for truth, read fact -- and the truth would make them free.

One Saturday, after a week of rain and sniffles, the sun came out, so she piled the children into her little red VW bug and took them to the Animal Farm. The parking lot was crowded, but a *VW* bug is small, and she managed to find a place for it. She and the children had a wonderful day, petting the animals, going on rides, enjoying the sunshine. Suddenly, she looked at her watch and found it was far later than she realized. She and the children ran to where the VW bug was parked,

and to their horror, found the whole front end was bashed in.

Outraged, she took herself off to the ranger's office. As he saw her approach, he laughed and said, "I'll bet you're the lady with the red VW bug."

"It isn't funny," she snapped.

"Now, clam down, lady, and let me tell you what happened. You know the elephant your children had such fun riding? She's a circus-trained elephant, and she was trained to sit on a red bucket. When she saw your car, she just did what she was trained to do and sat on it. Your engine's in the back, so you can drive it home without any trouble. And don't worry. Ut insurance will take care of it. Just fo on home, and we'll get back to you on Monday."

Slightly mollified, she and the kids got into the car and took off. But she was later than ever, so when she saw what looked like a very minor accident on the road, she didn't stop, but drove on.

Shortly, the flashing light and the siren came along, and she was pulled over. "Lady, don't you know that in this state it's a crime to leave the scene of an accident?" the trooper asked.

"But I wasn't in an accident," she protested.

"I suppose your car came that way," she said, pointing to the bashed-in front.

"No. An elephant sat on it"

"Lady, would you mind blowing into this little balloon?"

That taught her that facts alone are not enough; that facts, indeed, do not make up the whole truth. After that she read fairy tales to her children and encouraged them in their games or Make Believe and Let's Pretend.

I learned very early that if I wanted to find out the truth, to find out why people did terrible things to each other, or sometimes wonderful things -- why there was a war, why children are abused -- I was more likely to find the truth in story than in the encyclopedia. Again and again I read *Emily of the New*

Moon, by Lucy Maud Montgomery, because Emily's father was dying or diseased lungs. and so was mine. Emily wanted to be a writer, and so did I. Emily knew that there was more to the world than provable fact, and so did I. I read fairy tales, the myths of all nations, science fiction, the fantasies and family stories of E. Nesbitt. I read Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. And I read my parents' books, particularly those with lots of conversation in them. What was not in my frame of reference went right over my head.

We tend to find what we look for. If we look for dirt, we'll find dirt, whether it's there or not. A very nice letter I received from a reader said that she found *A Ring of Endless Light* very helpful to her in coming to terms with the death of a friend, but that another friend had asked her how it was that I used dirty words. I wrote back saying that I was not going to reread my book looking for dirty words. but that as far as I could remember, the only word in the book that could possibly be construed as dirty was *zuggy*. which I'd made up to avoid using dirty words. And wasn't looking for dirty words an ugly way to read a book?

One of my favorite books is Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. I read it one rainy weekend to a group of little girls. and a generation later 10 my granddaughters up in an old brass bed in the attic. Mary Lennox is a self-centered, spoiled-rotten little heroine, and I think we all recognize at least a little of ourselves in her. The secret garden is as much the garden of Mary's heart as it is the physical walled garden. By the end of the book, warmth and love and concern for others have come to Mary's heart, when Colin, the sick boy, is able to run again. And Dickon, the gardener's boy, looks at the beauty of the restored garden and says, "It's magic!" But "magic" is one of the key words that has become taboo to today's self-appointed censors, so, with complete disregard of content, they would add *The Secret Garden* to the pyre. I shudder. This attitude is extreme. It is also dangerous.

It comes down to the old question of separate standards, separate for adults and children. The only standard to be used in judging a children's book is: *Is it a good book?* Is it good enough for me? Because if a children's book is not good enough for all of us, it is not good enough for children.