

Considerations When Choosing and Using Books in First Day School

by Gail Thomas

The FGC Religious Education committee is encouraging Quaker religious educators to explore the many possible ways one can build a lesson around a single book. The Religious Education committee is calling such a lesson, especially one created using a form or template they have provided, a Lesson from a Book. (See sample lessons in this issue.) There are scores of excellent books available, so it makes sense to plan carefully and maximize the use of these books in the First Day School setting. Many meeting religious educators are challenged by irregular attendance or by wide age ranges within the same classroom. A Lesson from a Book can easily be customized to fit your specific meeting environment. Plus, more than one lesson can be created from the same book. When Lessons from a Book are kept in a notebook for future use, your meeting's resource library can grow surprisingly rapidly.

This article will discuss some of the many issues to consider in selecting appropriate books for Lesson from a Book plans, and will explore some of the "hidden" messages for which we need to look when selecting First Day School materials in general.

Age Appropriateness

Read any book you are considering for a lesson very carefully. Give books you are already familiar with a fresh look. The book, *Peace Begins with You*, by Katherine Scholes and illustrated by Robert Ingpen (Sierra Club Books, 1990), is an example of a book that at first glance seems to be aimed at five and six year old children, but which, upon closer examination, may actually be inappropriate for that age group. Like many books for a young audience, the cover portrays two young children, the illustrations are large and there is a minimum of text. However, upon reading the text and looking more carefully at the pictures, we see themes that are more mature, with sophisticated and sometimes painful images that make this book more suitable for middle school students.

Love Is..., adapted from the Bible by Wendy Anderson Halperin (Simon & Schuster, 2001) is another example of a book with a less than obvious ideal audience. I love half of this book. Using the text of 1 Corinthians 13, the book has lots of small, interesting pictures illustrating loving behavior, and including people of all ages and races with a diversity of ethnicities. Unfortunately, each positive page is paired with a page of negative behavior. While such contrast makes for great discussions with grade school age children, I would not look at these pages of negative behavior with pre-school children.

Know your book; know your age group; use material in developmentally appropriate ways.

Gender Issues

Be aware that many older books feature boys as the primary characters. This seems to be based on the assumption that girls will read about characters of either gender, but boys only want a boy hero. Even today, some of the nicest books available feature boys, e.g. *A Quiet Place*, by Douglas Wood, illustrated by Dan Andreasen (Aladdin, 2005) and *God's Quiet Things*, by Nancy Sweetland, illustrated by Rick Stevens (Eerdmans, 1994). However, there are also wonderful books featuring girls, and many, such as *I See the Moon*, by Kathi Appelt (Eerdmans, 1997) try to finesse gender. More importantly, newer books tend to avoid stereotyping behavior. Girls can be active and leaders. Boys may be sensitive and caring. Still, even new books are not guaranteed to be free of gender stereotyping, so read with awareness and sensitivity.

Racial and Cultural Awareness

As with gender, newer books tend to avoid racial and cultural stereotyping. Even if the main characters are white—and there are now many books which feature African-America, Latino or Asian children—the world of the book tends to be multiracial. Recently I was shocked to see a copy of *Pat the Bunny*, a children's classic by Edith Kunhardt Davies and illustrated by Dorothy Kunhardt, first published in 1940 and still popular: the two children are not only white, they are blond and very middle class in appearance. Older books in your FDS library need to be scrutinized care-fully—see Johanna Halbesien's article in this issues of REsource. Be particularly aware of how your books treat Native Americans and indigenous peoples.

Racial sensitivity is a vast topic and I'm still learning. I'd like to share just a few of the things I've learned. Although there are wonderful books on the Underground Railroad and many of our meetings may even have been part of the story, please beware of introducing these stories at too young an age. Children in first and second grade are aware of color and, thankfully, may not be applying these stories to their friends. Consider the impact on your class (whatever its racial make up) of having the first stories they read about people of color characterizing them as slaves. Or, the first stories they read about Native Americans showing them as people at war with white immigrants, living in teepees and wearing feather headdresses.

First Day School teachers will also want to consider the messages hidden in pictures of Jesus and nativity sets. Do they represent a variety of cultures or are they mainly the more traditional Italian or European white ethnicities? If a fair skinned Jesus is portrayed, is there also a Middle Eastern Jesus, a dark skinned Jesus, an Asian Jesus? The important word is diversity.

Carefully develop FDS activities as well. We are accustomed, for example, to encouraging role playing with older children when discussing books. Remember when doing so that many people of color find it offensive to have a white person pretend to be a slave or to be a person of color. And one certainly need not be a person of color to find it entirely inappropriate and painful.

We all grew up with blinders. Especially as a person who is white and middle class, I tend to think of my behavior as normative. I'm often surprised how little I've considered some of my assumptions. Cultural appropriation is my current edge, but I know there will be others. Therefore, I try to read books by authors who are different from me. I take racial awareness classes when I can. I've worked

on developing better listening skills—and I also seek to not feel guilty or become defensive, but to stay open and listen.

Considerations for Working with Middle School Aged Children

Sixth graders may still be insecure and tend to form cliques. Like 4th and 5th graders, they may still be testing what they hear outside, using racial epithets and disregarding how their behavior causes pain. Challenge such behavior whenever you become aware of it. With this age group, plan to select books and activities that will develop listening, caring for others' feelings, and self-awareness.

It is my experience that one can talk about anything with middle school children. Therefore, one can choose controversial or provocative texts. At that age young people are very interested in themselves and one another and will talk, debate, and hopefully, listen. A particularly sophisticated group might be able to help write lessons for younger children using the Lessons from a Book format.

Summary

The key is awareness, which comes by degrees. When evaluating books to consider for Lessons from a Book plans, we cannot catch those biases we do not see outside the books. We cannot avoid hidden messages we are immune to because of our assumptions. But we can practice reading with blinders off and, over time, and with the help of F/friends, we can grow in awareness and improve our evaluative skills. We can begin by knowing the books we are considering using, knowing our audience, and carefully considering the developmental levels within our group. We can look carefully at materials for those gender, racial, and cultural biases of which we are already aware, avoiding texts or images that are inappropriate and making good use of those resources that are truly excellent. And we can always listen.

Worship Sharing Queries

- How have friendships nurtured your spirit?
- Friendship and community involve both give and take, as well as joy and sorrow, gift and loss, and safety and risk. How have you experienced friendship or community (or both) as a weaving of such opposites?
- How has your meeting community changed you? How has the meeting community challenged you?
- How has your understanding of community deepened over the years?
- For what aspect or experience of your meeting community are you most grateful?

This document was downloaded from the website of Friends General Conference. Explore the many resources and opportunities we offer for Quakers, Quaker meetings, and all interested individuals. Go to www.fgcquaker.org.

