



Hey, What are you Reading?

If novels came with ratings on them like movies do, then life for the Christian parent would be so much easier. It would be easier for the twelve-year-old son or daughter too. He or she would simply not buy it if it had a 14A or an R rating. The parent could simply say: G-rated novels you can choose and read on your own; PG novels are novels that you may read if I read them too and if we then talk about them. The 14A, 18A, and the R-rated novels you may not read. To the fifteen-year-old daughter, the parent could say: Since you are old enough, you can read any 14A novel without my knowledge; but you may not read any 18A or R-rated novels. Rating novels sounds like a simple, workable solution, but is it a real solution? Most Christian parents will realize that parental responsibility extends beyond the accepted Canadian movie ratings. The very fact that novels are not rated may actually be a good thing for Christian parents. Without this rating system, parents need to talk to the child about the novels which they are reading. That talk is good; it's a necessity. Christian parents must take a serious and active role in guiding their children in reading novels.

Many sons may not want to read novels, but they should. They should visit worlds beyond their personal experiences so that they grow in understanding of their own culture or of other cultures. They need to see how others struggle with good and evil, how conflicts or issues in society can break one down, how individuals need the surrounding love of friends or a community to build them up, or how people in this life who live without the gospel struggle, grope, cry out with none to provide real peace. The son or daughter who loves to read will learn the effects of a previous government's philosophy, will gain a deep insight into the hardships of war, of rebellion, of slavery, of being a Jew, of being bullied, or of experiencing a life-changing illness. That son or daughter can also read about pioneers who succeeded and of those who didn't, about the realities of medieval life, about the need to sacrifice during times of recession or depression, about the mental struggles of a soldier in battles or as a veteran, and about a budding love relationship that blossoms into marriage, into family building, and into real-life issues. So many worlds can open up to the son or daughter that parents can become scared. Parents can fear ill effects. Parents can become overwhelmed. Parents can then easily over-react.

Over-reaction to the literature that a son or daughter reads often stems from a lack of parents' pro-action. Concurrently, overreaction to their choice of literature can also stem from a lack of parents preparing themselves for this stage and for their tasks in this stage. Christian parents should prepare themselves so that they feel and are capable to guide their children in the reading process. The father should go beyond Louis L'Armour, Clive Cussler, and Zane Grey; the mother should read books beyond those published by Bethany House or Tyndale Press. Mom and dad should read literature that their son or daughter will likely read before he or she gets to them. Parents must be active readers. They should read a variety of genres too. The more they read, the more they will feel prepared to guide their children in their growth of reading.

Worldview

The task of guiding children in their reading starts earlier than checking which books the tween or teen is reading. It begins even before the parents read with their three-year-old child on the sofa or on his bed. It involves establishing a solid Christian or Reformed worldview in the family. That worldview must be developed between husband and wife. That worldview is obviously different from the present post-modern anything-goes view, from the gospel of individualism, or from the escapism into nirvanas, spiritualisms, drugs, occult, or other religions. The Christian worldview is a positive one, one that explains troubles, brokenness in life, the heart of darkness, the joys of light, the place of mankind in this world, the reasons for different cultures in this world, and the hardships

that Christians may face in this present world. It invokes the need for humble obedience, for authority, and for redemption, not in a saviour of this world, but in the one and only Saviour. It kindles disgust for sinful behaviours of man. It provides the basis for discussions about literature. It stimulates growth in faith. A husband and wife would develop this worldview as they study God's Word together, but also as they discuss the novels that they read. They should discuss why the novel was a good read, what the message is, whether or not the author provides a message fitting with Scripture or with a Christian world view. Doing this regularly will provide context for the soon-to-be teen who will be reading along-side mom and dad. And if dad is not a reader, he should still listen and dialogue with his wife about the books she reads. And if both parents aren't readers, they really should put away excuses – we all have them – and urge each other to read. At first it will be difficult, but the enjoyment will come. Children need knowledgeable parents, parents who are steeped in Scripture, who can model reading, and who can incite meaningful discussions about the readings.

Choosing books to read

Like the watching of movies, the reading of novels is a serious business. It is not simple entertainment. Choosing a good novel may be difficult enough. Judging a book by its cover isn't good enough. Covers are designed and written to sell the book. Looking for an author's name may be a good way to begin, but an author may differ from his earlier to his later novels. Using the bestsellers' list is also not the best criterion, since the bestseller list is often influenced or generated by media. So how do parents choose novels?

Parents should firstly admit that they will pick up a novel because of the cover, the write-up on the back cover, because of the intriguing title, because they know the author, or because someone (not necessarily in their church) recommended it. Perhaps they recently read a praising review of it. Although we are Reformed Christians, we still choose novels according to much the same criteria that our non-Christian neighbours use. We too may lean against a shelf in Chapters or in Coles and sample a few pages just to see if it intrigues or if the language is aesthetically sound. Once we have selected and purchased the novel, or once we have taken it out of our local library, we unlock its secret world as we nestle into our recliner and read. If parents pick up novels in this manner, so will the emerging readers.

Careful reading

Choosing the novel, however, is not the most difficult for parents. More important is the watchful and careful reading of it. In their book, *Literature through the Eyes of Faith*, Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin acknowledge that to answer the question, "How am I supposed to read this book?" is not any simpler than to answer the question, "How am I to love my neighbour?" There is no magic formula; we learn to read novels "through experience, through triumph and struggle." On the one hand, we read for enjoyment. We enjoy the beautiful language, the believable characters, the complexity of plot, and the revelations of vistas yet unknown. On the other hand, we evaluate what we are reading with eyes of Scripture. Is the author endorsing a Christian worldview where sin and evil are truly and properly portrayed as sin and evil, and where good as the Bible speaks of it, is portrayed as good? Does the novelist call her readers to endorse unchristian lifestyles? Peter Leithart, in the book *The Christian Imagination, Revised and Expanded Edition*, suggests that parents ask themselves questions while reading or after they have read the novel, questions like: Do I wish to submit to this author? Is the pattern of desire that this book encourages healthy or unhealthy? Does the writer present models that may be imitated or negative models as warnings? Will my involvement with the world and its Creator be enriched by seeing the world as the author wishes me to see it? By asking and by dialoguing about these big questions, parents are practising Christian discernment. By doing this regularly with each other and with their grade-school children, parents are teaching their budding teens to read critically, thoughtfully, and Christianly.

A parent and a teen should have the courage to put away a novel that is trash. Dr. Deanna Smid, an English professor at Redeemer, would rather use the word obscene. What makes a novel obscene? She provides a complex answer (I hope that I paraphrase her accurately): Firstly, a poorly written book is obscene. If the language is stilted, if the dialogue is unnatural, if the

characters are undeveloped caricatures, or if the novel is preachy, overly sentimental, or sensational, the novel is obscene. Secondly, a novel can also be obscene not because it depicts sin, but because it depicts human sin in order to encourage the human practice of it. Thirdly, it can be obscene not because of an occasional crude word, but because it uses profanities and blasphemies as normal or proper speech for man, especially when he is angry or shocked. Trashy or obscene novels should have no places in our Christian homes.

Conclusion

Especially in the Christian community, parents should do all they can to promote reading. Since Christians are disciples of the Word, reading should have a major priority in our homes. Bibles should be open books in our homes, not dust collectors. Quality magazines should be lying beside the living room chairs or couch. Children's literature and novels should be available at all times. Even though a Christian home cannot have all "safe" books, it can and should have a safe atmosphere in which to read books. That safety is developed by providing children and teens with good novels. It is developed by providing them with an open, trusting relationship in which novels are discussed. Talking about what was good in the novel or what wasn't good would be a good place to start. Discernment is developed in homes where parents and kids openly dialogue about a Christian worldview and how the novel that they read builds or breaks down that worldview.

Having rated literature is not the way to go. Having a perfectly censored and safe library where kids can simply read with their minds turned off is not the way to go either. Having electronic gadgets in living rooms, family rooms, and even in bedrooms (I certainly hope not) is not the way to go either. Having non-electronic rooms, having non-electronic times, having comfortable places to sit, having opportunities to dialogue are all ways to go. Searching for and enjoying the beauty of a well written piece of literature is the way to go.

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