

The Moral Imagination: The Heart and Soul's Best Guide
Achieving the Goals of a Catholic Education
Through the Good, True, and Beautiful in Literature

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“The eye sees what it has been given to see by concrete circumstance, but the imagination reproduces what, by some related gift, it is able to make live.”

-Flannery O'Connor

Introduction:

In August of 1993, John Paul II released an encyclical to his brother bishops entitled *Veritatis Splendor – The Splendor of Truth*. In this beautiful document John Paul reminded his readers that there is truth, it is knowable, and the human heart craves that truth. The encyclical is divided into three parts; the first part is of particular interest because the question raised is what so many parents and teachers are asking today about Catholic education.

John Paul II begins with the story of the young man who comes to Jesus asking, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus asks the young man why he asks about the good, as there is only one who is good. He then tells him to keep the Commandments, which the young man says that he does. “What do I still lack?” he asks of Jesus. (Matthew 19:16-21).

John Paul II steps back from the Gospel and points out that the young man is not asking for other rules he must follow, but an inner conversion he feels called to obey. When he asks about the good, he is seeking God, who is the source of all goodness. Jesus tells him how to fill his longing for the Good – He, the Truth, evangelizes him with the truth.

We parents, teachers, administrators, and clergy are asking the same question as the young man. We ask not only for ourselves, but for our children and those in our care. “Teacher, what good must I do, and what must be done for them, to help them achieve eternal life?” If we are not pursuing the answer to this question, the point of the Catholic education is meaningless.

Pope Benedict the XVI, in an address to the Bishops of England, Scotland, and Wales said there is an “urgent need to proclaim the Gospel afresh in a highly secularized environment.” This is the new evangelization called for by our Holy Fathers, yet it is an evangelization that demands a personal transformation from each and every one of us. It is not, as the young man who questions Jesus learns, a simple checklist we mark off to grow in our spiritual life.

The new evangelization, according to Catholic writer Stratford Caldecott, begins with a call to discipleship. The desire to be connected to Christ, to Him who is the Good, leads the soul on a “way of beauty.” For children, especially Catholic children, this journey begins in the home as the child sees the

relationship of the parent/parents with Christ. For those children, their parents as first educators is truly a blessing. The recitation of prayers, Bible stories read, saints lives examined – these all hone the moral imagination of the child.

However, there are also those who do not have the benefit of this example, and therefore there must be an awakening in the child of the moral imagination which takes place outside the home. As Caldecott states so beautifully, this awakening, when it takes place inside of a community (the Catholic school), helps to create a place of “shared values and ideals, a moral environment where the individual person is valued, supported, and cherished.”

Suddenly, the character of Christian community permeates the entire school building, reaffirming the way each individual acts towards another, the respect and attention given to each person during the day. That which was once simply a written mission statement comes alive in the acts of prayer and liturgy, kindness and courtesy, humility, self-sacrifice, and self-discipline.

What is Morality?

What does it mean to be moral? If we go back to the Gospel of the young man and Jesus, we must note that the commandments Jesus asks the young man about all have to do with the relationship of one person to another. Jesus specifically mentions murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and honoring one’s parents.

The commandments that guide our relationships with one another are not more important than those which pertain only to God. However, John Paul II is very clear about how these commandments must be lived when he writes, “Both the Old and the New Testaments explicitly affirm that *without love of neighbor*, made concrete in keeping the commandments, *genuine love for God is not possible*” (emphasis in the original).

John Paul II further writes, “The moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man.” We must grow in our gratitude to God by living a moral life that shows our love and respect for one another. How do we prepare the mind of a child to understand what this means? Again, John Paul II tells us that, “God has already given an answer to this question: he did so by creating man and ordering him with wisdom and love to his final end, through the law which is inscribed in his heart (cf Rom 2:15), the ‘natural law.’” The work has been done for us by the Creator, the law of God has been written on the heart of each person. The drawing forth of what has been inscribed there is the challenge.

Create In Me a Clean Heart, O God

Dr. Vigen Guroian, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Loyola College in Baltimore writes in his book, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*:

“Mere instruction in morality is not sufficient to nurture the virtues. It might even backfire, especially when the presentation is heavily exhortative and the pupil’s will is coerced. Instead, *a compelling vision of the goodness of goodness itself* needs to be presented in a way that is attractive and stirs the imagination. A good moral education addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of human nature. Stories are an irreplaceable medium for this kind of moral education – that is, the education of character.” (pg. 20)

The moral imagination, Guroian says, is the “distinctively human power to conceive of men and women as moral beings, i.e., as persons, not things or animals whose value to us is their usefulness. It is the process by which the self makes metaphors out of images recorded by the senses and stored in memory, which then are employed to find and suppose moral correspondences in experience.”

Why is this so important, the ability to create metaphors for oneself? It is because they are, unconsciously for the most part, what each person uses to make sense of the world. New York University Professor Neil Postman is adamant about metaphor being not simply an ornament in an English class, but an actual organ of perception:

“Through metaphors, we see the world as one thing or another. Is light a wave or a particle? Are molecules like billiard balls or force fields? Is history unfolding according to some instructions of nature or a divine plan? Are our genes like information codes? Is a literary work like an architect’s blueprint or a mystery to be solved?” (Postman, *The End of Education*, pg. 174)

Jesus taught us time and again with metaphors that stay in our minds and hearts. He is the Good Shepherd, we are his sheep. We are called to be salt and light for others. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. The grain of wheat, the mustard seed, the pearl of great price...all of these are metaphors to help us understand those things we cannot easily comprehend.

Jesus even teaches the people that their hearts are like soil: rocky and hard, full of thorns and weeds, or fertile and ready to receive the Word of God. For those who were willing to hear, open minded and willing of heart, the metaphors and parables of Jesus makes sense. It is for this reason that the moral imagination is best formed in the young heart and mind. The soil has not, God willing, already been turned to a barren or rocky wasteland, nor is it

choked with brambles. The beautiful, fertile heart and mind of a child is the perfect resting place for the seeds of the moral imagination.

What Then, Shall We Read?

Nearly forty years ago psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim published his study on the need for moral education for children, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Bettelheim very pointedly stated that children needed a moral education; not one that uses “abstract ethical concepts” but rather one that teaches through “that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful...The child finds this kind of meaning through fairy tales.” (p. 5)

Fairy tales are filled with the people and images understood by children: the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish, the lazy and the industrious, the good and the evil. The symbols are not vague and hidden but extremely overt: flowers, water, dirt, ashes. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge said, the best symbol “always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible.” Symbols are not chosen randomly but point to an abstract meaning naturally because of what they are physically. Water symbolizes cleansing because it cleanses. The rose symbolizes beauty because it is beautiful.

Fairy tales present “other worlds,” but they still employ “real” moral laws of character and virtue. The challenge to the reader or listener is to make sense out of these worlds, to imaginatively navigate him/herself as a resident of the tales, to take the risks, joys, failures and triumphs therein along with the characters and emerge transformed.

The virtues now come to life, with a greater significance and personal identification. The powerful images of good and evil found in stories such as “The Snow Queen” or “Cinderella” stimulate the imagination and help form the metaphors necessary to interpret the world. Relating these imaginative stories to those Bible stories that the child hears at home, at Mass and at school reinforces those virtues that one needs as a mature person.

Russell Kirk wrote in *Enemies of Permanent Things*, “The fantastic and the fey, far from being unhealthy for small children, are precisely what a small child needs; under such a stimulus a child’s moral imagination quickens. Out of these early tales of wonder comes a sense of awe – and the beginning of philosophy. All things begin and end in mystery.”

As Catholics, what more could we ask for our children and students than the child awakening to awe, to being born into wonder? The mystery which is the Mass, the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation – they become more easily accepted and held dear in the heart when that heart has been prepared to receive the most precious of all mysteries.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “The truth of our human tradition and handing it on with a voice of authority, an unshaken voice, that is the one eternal education: to be sure enough that something is true to dare to tell it to a child.” Likewise, Ethel Pochocki, in her introduction to *Once Upon a Time Saints* writes, “Fairy tales clear the way for sanctity. They are the child’s first morality play, clear-cut, no-nonsense black and white, good and evil, life and death – with a bit of fun thrown in to alleviate the pain.” How well said!

Fairy tales, because of their accessibility, are one of the greatest storehouses of wisdom and moral insight about the human experience. They are a tonic for the old soul, a source of delight for the young. They restore our love for life and strengthen our desire to be good. They lighten our hearts, engage our resolve, and sweeten our minds.

Happily, the moral imagination of the child is not dependent on fairy tales alone for sustenance, but on the best of literature appropriate for children. This does not mean, however, books written expressly FOR children, and certainly not the didactic tomes which often pass for children’s literature. Good literature should allow us to enjoy our lives more or to endure it better. Fortunately, there is a wealth of children’s classics which do both.

Dr. Mitchell Kalpakgian, Professor of English at Simpson College in Iowa, gave a beautiful summation of what good children’s literature should do for readers:

“Children’s classics which illuminate the mysteries of life both increase our capacity for joy and strengthen our patience and perseverance. They whet our appetite for life and instill a love of the noble, heroic, and the courageous. They make us rejoice in our childhood and the simple, innocent pleasure which form a lifetime of fond memories, and they remind us that, though we are older, our childhood remains within us and comes alive as we enjoy the company of the young or revel in our children and grandchildren...Our lives make a difference in the lives of others. That wishes are answered, that luck is real, that dreams are not too good to be true, that heroes conquer monsters, that little tailors defeat giants all testify to a world governed by Divine Providence, not by might, cunning, or chance. That the world is “so filled with a number of things” – fun, friendship, stories, homes, families, adventures – acknowledges that life’s deepest sources of happiness are for everyone. That the simple outwit the cunning, that the weak defeat the strong, that the humble are exalted, that children in their innocence have a “power” which makes men and beasts serve them reassure us that, in Don Quixote’s words, ‘where there is life, there is hope.’” (The Mysteries of Life in Children’s Literature)

Classic children's literature is the solid base on which the moral imagination is constructed. Having read the classics early in life, students have a firm grasp of virtues and values as they read more adult literature in the high schools and in college. Reading upper level texts with a "Catholic eye" becomes second nature. For example, when the book *Little Women*, with the theme of a happy home life is read in grade school, the tragedy of a family torn apart in Elie Wiesel's *Night* is easier to understand and take to heart in high school.

In the best books for the young there is a recurrent theme of wishes and desires, the heart's longing to be fulfilled. Often the wishes and dreams come true, but only after much praying, hoping, working and waiting. The virtues of patience, loyalty, courage, charity, compassion, and perseverance are all instrumental in bringing about the desired outcome – and always dependent on the will of God Himself.

These are the very virtues we, as Catholics, nurture in our children. They are not to be confused with values, which may be as changing as the Kansas weather. Children's classics reinforce real virtues, reminding us that human happiness often comes in the form of self-abnegation, not self-gratification. The perennial truth of children's classics, the "good books," is that it is in giving of oneself completely, without expecting to receive something back, that we find redemption.

The Cardinal Virtues

The Catholic Church admonishes us to grow in the Cardinal Virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude. All other virtues fall under these, and each one is necessary for growth in the spiritual life. Each of the books chosen for the school grade levels is one that encourages that mysterious inner growth towards the good, the true, and the beautiful.

It is important to have the meanings of these four firmly in our minds so that we can see how the other virtues we are working on sit safely under them, each deepening the faith and growing the soul toward God:

Prudence: This is right reason applied to practice. It is not simply looking at all the possibilities and choices and then choosing one, it is making a choice toward action based on that which is known to be right and true. Prudence allows us to take counsel carefully with ourselves and others and then direct our activity toward the Good.

Justice: This entails the habitual inclination of the will. Justice calls us to a constant and permanent determination to give everyone his rightful due. In

other words, it is the respect we owe to others because they are not us – we protect their rights as children of God to our fullest ability.

Fortitude: This virtue is the virtue of martyrs. It serves prudence and justice – which tell us what needs to be done – by giving us the courage and strength to act. Fortitude allows us to cope with sorrow and loss, steadies our will, and helps us overcome fear.

Temperance: The moderation of our own desires, especially the desire for legitimate goods, lest the inordinate desire for them should take over. Temperance reminds us we are more than animals, and that we are capable of acting for the Good even though our nature desires otherwise.

When we fully understand the Cardinal Virtues, other virtues quite naturally occur to us that are subordinate to these. They include respect, responsibility, diligence, gratitude, generosity, courage, loyalty, compassion, hope, self-control, charity, faithfulness, courtesy, perseverance, honesty, gentleness, love of country, and last, but certainly not least, a sense of wonder at the world which God has so generously provided for us.

The following pages are recommendations by grade level of stories and books which promote virtue. Though not overtly Catholic, they are treasure troves of life's richest wisdom. In their simplicity they help us to appreciate the gift of life, the enjoyment of playfulness in learning, and the ability to clearly see things as they are. Chosen with the specific intention of forming the moral imagination, they will, as the poet Percy Shelley once wrote, "allow us to experience life from the perspectives of others, which is thus essential to love itself."

Kindergarten:

OBEDIENCE

Peter Rabbit, Tom Kitten, Benjamin Bunny
and others

The Paradise of Children (Hawthorne)

The Story of Ping (Flack)

Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak)

COURAGE

Tim to the Rescue (Ardizzone)

The Story of Ferdinand the Bull (Leaf)

Beauty and the Beast (best and most complete version)

http://www.worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Andrew_Lang_fairy_books/Blue_fairy_book/Beauty_and_the_Beast.html

The Bears on Hemlock Mountain (Dalglish)

PERSEVERANCE

Ant and the Grasshopper (Aesop)

The Tortoise and the Hare (Aesop)

Katy and the Big Snow (Burton)

FRIENDSHIP/FAMILY

Androcles and the Lion (Aesop)

The Mouse and the Lion (Aesop)

Winnie the Pooh (Milne)

Dogger (Shirley Hughes)

The Golden Press Children's Bible – highly enjoyable for the young – bite size pieces easily read in conjunction with other stories.

Brief Synopses:

Most parents and teachers are familiar with **Aesop's Fables** – short stories that teach a moral. Many children find these easy to re-tell upon hearing them; writing the stories down as the child tells the story and then giving them time to illustrate them provides a great exercise in imagination. One of the better collections in print is ***The Aesop for Children***, illustrated by Milo Winter.

Likewise, the Beatrix Potter book ***Peter Rabbit*** is well known. The other Potter books are equally as charming, and the pictures are delightful. Potter was able to teach lessons about honesty, obedience and diligence as well as some realities about the world (Farmer McGregor caught Peter's father and put him in a pie – farmers don't want rabbits eating their gardens!) in her beautiful, small books.

The story, "The Paradise of Children," is that of Pandora and the jar of evils and woes let out into the world. It is found in the Nathaniel Hawthorne book of stories for children entitled ***A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls***. This story is a lovely parallel of Adam and Eve; when Hope is what is left at the bottom of the jar, children can relate this to the hope of the Redeemer promised by God the Father to the fallen Adam and Eve. ***A Wonder Book***, and its companion, ***Tanglewood Tales*** are both sound investments for the school library.

The Story of Ping is amusing, exciting, gentle, yet firm. What will happen to the naughty little duck when he is separated from his family? How will he get back home, and how must he change his behavior in order to stay safe? This is also a great book for introducing a different culture to children. What is life like on a sampan? Why are the ducks so important to the family who owns them?

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak is both simple and profound. This is a story about learning to tame one's own "inner beast" by guarding the appetites and passions. There is a wonderful theme underlying the book – every child needs discipline and love to become fully human. In governing our own lives and decisions, we become true daughters and sons of the Father.

"Beauty and the Beast" is one of the best of the fairy tales to read aloud. This version is contained in ***Andrew Lang's Blue Fairy Book***, still in print. The online version is free. This story is long and probably will take more than one class time to read. It is well worth the time spent. The richness of the language, although much more difficult than most picture book versions, is engaging and magical.

Beauty has been retold many times and the original story has taken a beating. A faithful retelling stays true to the theme that goodness, the virtue Beauty possesses, is her most valuable asset. Her ability to see the goodness of the Beast comes from the beauty of her heart and her desire to do the right thing. She does not make the beast more cultured or refined and then love him – she grows in love for him out of her ability to see his inner good.

There is a nice, newer fairy tale picture book in print which stays closer than most to the story. It is written by Ursula Jones. If a picture book is desired, it's a decent choice. Otherwise, the free version on line would be the best choice –or the purchase of the ***Blue Fairy Book***.

Munro Leaf's ***The Story of Ferdinand the Bull*** is the story of a bull being raised to someday be a part of a bullfight. Unfortunately, Ferdinand prefers flowers to fighting. What will he do on the day he must face the matador in the bullring?

Tim to the Rescue by Edward Ardizzone is one of those books that help children understand that anyone can be a hero – no matter how small. Tim is a young boy, restless in school, who is allowed to leave on an adventure aboard a ship – as long as he promises to keep up with his school work! There is just enough danger, excitement, and even slapstick humor to hold the attention of little ones. The illustrations, also by Ardizzone, are superb.

The Kindergarten class will all be chanting, “There are no bears on Hemlock Mountain, no bears, no bears at all,” by the time they finish this book. ***The Bears on Hemlock Mountain*** is a great story about facing fear - very real fear – and finding the courage to do what needs to be done. This is an interesting book to read along with *Tim to the Rescue* because the themes of obedience and staying on task figure prominently in both.

Winnie the Pooh will delight the entire class – as well as the reader. A.A. Milne wrote the stories for his own son, the real Christopher Robin, and the desire to create something of worth shines through the book. Pooh’s friends are interesting because they have such vivid personalities: Piglet is shy and scared, Owl is pretentious, Rabbit is irascible, and Eeyore mournfully gloomy. The characters may gently scold or admonish each other, but they do not condescend or judge – they have obvious affection for one another. This little book is a good lesson for everyone on how to really love a friend.

Virginia Lee Burton’s books teach effortlessly. Her trucks, steam shovels and houses all understand what is needed to accomplish given tasks or states in life: perseverance, humility, diligence, self-giving. ***Katy and the Big Snow*** is a wonderful story about “digging” in and getting a job done, even when faced with adversity.

Dogger, by Shirley Hughes, is probably the least known book on this list. This is a book you will want to purchase more than one copy of, as kids will want to take it home to Mom and Dad and hear it read again. Davy has a favorite stuffed toy, Dogger. He takes it out with him one day and loses it. He finds it again on a table at the school fair – for sale! Davy needs someone’s help to recover his dog, and it is his sister who saves the day. Absolutely NOT a sticky, saccharine book – the children act out of love for one another, but they do it rather sensibly. The illustrations are beautiful and the story is one that will evoke great conversations about how to perform acts of kindness for one another – especially our brothers and sisters.

First Grade:

RESPONSIBILITY/DILIGENCE

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel (Burton)
Lentil (McCloskey)
Pinocchio (Collodi)

FAMILY/FRIENDS

Happy Little Family (Caudill)
Little Pear (Lattimore)
Thy Friend, Obadiah (Turkle)
Oxcart Man (Hall)

GOODNESS/GRATITUDE

Andy and the Lion (Daugherty)
The Pied Piper of Hamelin (Browning)
King Midas (Hawthorne)
Miraculous Pitcher (Hawthorne)

FORTITUDE

Cinderella (Grimm)
<http://audio.ancientfaith.com/specials/oi2012/Cinderella.pdf>
The Ugly Duckling (Andersen)
http://www.worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Hans_Christian_Andersen/Andersen_fairy_tale_3.html
The Snow Queen (Andersen)
http://www.worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Hans_Christian_Andersen/Andersen_fairy_tale_17.html

The Golden Press Children's Bible – Again, stories in this version are easily readable and are easy to parallel with other selections for this grade level.

Brief Synopses:

There is a wonderful edition currently in print of four stories by Virginia Lee Burton: ***The Little House, Katy and the Big Snow, Mable the Cable Car,*** and ***Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel.*** Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel MaryAnn must find a way to show people how useful she is and why she shouldn't be sold for junk. This is a great story about diligence, ingenuity and friendship.

Lentil by Robert McCloskey is all about overcoming what one can't do well, and finding the gift or talent one has been given. Young Lentil can't sing, but he loves music. Instead of giving up on his dream, he learns to play the harmonica...and saves the day when he foils Old Man Sneep's plan to silence the town marching band. This is a great book for kids who may feel like they have to "keep up with" the other kids at every task. Be yourself!

In the Disney version of **Pinocchio**, the emphasis is on how the little puppet can grow up and become a "real boy." Pinocchio constantly finds himself in all kinds of mischief, but he attains the wish of becoming real when he demonstrates a true and unselfish heart by saving his father, Gepetto. Satisfying? Yes....sort of. Pinocchio gets his wish, but does he actually grow in his moral life?

In the book **Pinocchio**, Collodi has really created a masterpiece of children's literature. Pinocchio is the story of the Prodigal Son, a tale of a wandering rogue. He is created out of wood, and his being remains wooden until he connects the reality of the world, his deeds and his conscience. It is Pinocchio's response to the world, as it is for all of us, that determines what kind of person we will be. Will he make excuses, lay blame on others, lie and cheat to get what he believes he wants? Will he remain a puppet, a marionette with someone else pulling his strings all his life?

Collodi's Pinocchio commits wrongs that are not "merely the mistakes of ignorance, but the consequences of a hard head, undisciplined passions, and a misdirected will that resists good advice" (Guroian, pg. 42). He is not the innocent little wooden-headed creature who has the bad thrust upon him – he willingly participates in his own troubles, not caring about the effect his actions have on others, especially his father, Gepetto.

Throughout the book, Pinocchio is longing for his father, as we long for the Father. He continually makes bad decisions, neglects his filial duties, and turns from the good. Pinocchio must learn to turn away from his own destructive willfulness before he can achieve the status of a human boy. By the same token, we must turn from our life of willfulness and sin, in order to become children of the Father. Through our Baptism and the Eucharist we grown in our lives as true sons and daughters – we become less wooden and more fully human.

Pinocchio is a book that will seem easy and fun for children of this age to listen to, but there is plenty to think about and discuss. And interestingly, Pinocchio is on his own journey of developing a moral imagination. As the story progresses, he will outgrow his vain imaginings and his fantastical interpretations of the world; he will see things as they are – the true relationships he enjoys and the moral obligations and responsibilities he needs to embrace. This is definitely a book to take some time with – it is well worth the effort.

Happy Little Family by Rebecca Caudill is the story of the Fairchild family, living in the Kentucky hills over 100 years ago. The world is seen through the eyes of the youngest, Bonnie, who tags along after her brothers and sisters experiencing the daily pleasures and stresses of life. This book has a sense of freshness and wonder that naturally draws children into the joyful bonds of family life that we all desire.

There is a lightheartedness about the book **Little Pear**, by Eleanor Frances Lattimore, and it reminds us that we do need to be distracted occasionally from the seriousness of life. Little Pear and his friends live in China, around 1900. They are mischievous, and this lands them in trouble at times. Little Pear's older sister finds herself rescuing him more than once. This book and its sequel, **Little Pear and His Friends**, capture the mystery of childhood play, doing

things simply for the sheer joy in them. Play, for all its apparent uselessness, is that which has a profound effect on each of us as we grow into adulthood.

Happy hearts and happy faces,
Happy play in grassy places –
That was how in ancient ages,
Children grew to kings and sages. R.L. Stevenson, “Good and Bad Children”

Thy Friend, Obadiah by Brinton Turkle is another of those simple, yet deeply meaningful books. Obadiah, a young Quaker boy, is followed everywhere by a seagull. He cannot stand the teasing he takes about it, but misses the seagull when it finally disappears. When it returns, injured, he learns to cherish the friendship he has with the bird as he nurses it to health. Not overtly religious, this book shows God’s love for us even in the creatures He puts into our lives.

Donald Hall’s beautiful book **Oxcart Man**, illustrated by Barbara Cooney, shares the simple joy of a family working together to provide for their family’s needs. They work alongside each other through the year, preparing for the time that the father will take their goods to town to sell. He is able to sell everything, including the ox and cart, buy the goods they need, and return home, “with coins still in his pocket.” This is a lovely book for emphasizing how important each member of any family is in order to get the task of family living done.

Andy and the Lion by James Daugherty is a re-telling of the ancient story of Androcles and the Lion. Daugherty masterfully tells the story of how one good deed can certainly turn the tide of events in ways one can only imagine. The pictures are evocative of the joy both Andy and the Lion feel when they meet up for a second time. Small acts of kindness are not forgotten!

Robert Browning’s **The Pied Piper of Hamelin** is a wonderful poem that contrasts beautifully with *Andy and the Lion*. The people of Hamelin turn to the Piper to help rid their town of a rat infestation, promising to pay him for his help. He does as he is asked, but the heart-hearted mayor and townspeople do not keep their part of the agreement. The Piper warns them what will happen when they refuse to be grateful, but they ignore his warnings. How often do we ignore the admonition to have grateful hearts? This is a great story for a thoughtful discussion.

The story of King Midas can be found in many retellings. A very nice one is found in Hawthorne’s **A Wonder Book** entitled, “The Golden Touch.” The greed of Midas is his downfall, when he wishes everything he touches to turn to gold. He didn’t how very rich he really was – rich in the things that matter – until he lost those things most precious to him.

“**The Miraculous Pitcher**” is a lesser known story, but one that is perfect in the discussion about giving thanks and being generous. This story is also found in Hawthorne’s **A Wonder Book**. Baucis and Philemon are two old people in a little town in ancient Greece. When two mysterious strangers enter the town (gods disguised as beggars), they are treated with scorn by the inhabitants. It is only Baucis and Philemon, having almost nothing themselves, who welcome them into their home. They offer a meager dinner of milk, bread and cheese, apologizing for having so little milk. Yet as their guests drink, the pitcher never runs dry! Their hospitality is rewarded by the gods with a perpetual pitcher of fresh milk. This is a great story

to talk about in conjunction with the Gospel story of Jesus feeding the multitudes with loaves and fishes.

It is almost impossible to say enough about ***Cinderella***. The Grimm brothers recorded this story, and we have to remember that they were very religious men. The story of Cinderella resonates with all kinds of beautiful Biblical allusions. Cinderella is taken from her rightful place as daughter of the house and thrown into the ashes of the kitchen. Like Jesus during the Passion, she is stripped of her beautiful clothes and dressed in rags, reviled and scorned by those who should love her. She is also like Job, patiently suffering the punishments that have befallen her, even in her innocence. She does not curse her father, but asks for a branch from a tree for a gift. This she waters with her tears – her sufferings. The branch is planted by her mother’s grave and she daily goes to pray there. It is the tree that grows from the branch that provides her with the beautiful clothing for the balls.

Cinderella grieves for the loss of her mother and lives in humiliation. Both of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and “Blessed are they who mourn” apply to her situation. She is willing to suffer, but she also prays for help. For three days (a significant number!) she attends the balls at the palace. Each night she hides her true identity and goes back to the ash pile. However, she has, as the story says, her lamp burning beside her. Like the wise virgins in the Bible, she is ready for the time when the King’s son will come to find her – she awaits the coming of the bridegroom. When the prince asks if there are any other young women than the two stepsisters, Cinderella washes herself and presents her clean and happy face to the son. “Let us be glad and rejoice and give him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his wife has made herself read.” (Revelation 19:7)

Both ***The Snow Queen*** and ***The Ugly Duckling*** are masterful fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen. There are links to the original stories included above. Both of these stories have been retold, abridged, dissected and misrepresented. They are really the best in the original, and those versions are online and easy to find. ***The Ugly Duckling*** is the story of a small bird who hatches from his egg and immediately is made to feel ugly because of his different appearance. His mother loves him very much, but knows he must find his way in the world. The duckling survives a number of unhappy situations and much abuse, but in the end he weeps tears of joy upon finding himself a beautiful swan. It is his diligence and courage that allows him to find his truly beautiful self, because he easily could have given up and hated what he thought he was. He is willing to courageously go out on his own and in doing so, he discovers not only his outer beauty, but his inner strength as well.

The Snow Queen is another fairy tale that is so mysterious. The courage and love of young Gerda for her friend Kay overcomes the wicked coldness and empty promises of the Snow Queen. Kay’s heart and eye have been pierced with pieces from a wicked mirror that a demon has made. Those who get a piece of this mirror in their eyes cannot see the world as it really is, but see it as an ugly and horrible distortion; worse yet, a piece of the mirror in the heart causes the victim’s heart to turn as cold as ice. Kay, who had once been the closest companion of Gerda, now takes delight in mocking her and all they had loved. He is taken away by the Snow Queen and slowly loses himself to her empty promises. Gerda, however, is willing to go to the ends of the earth to find him. When she does, the redemptive act of her love is enough to save him. This is a wonderful story, and one which really prepares children to understand better the wicked White Queen in the Narnia books.

Second Grade:

TRUTH/FAITH

The Princess and the Goblin (MacDonald)

The Emperor's New Clothes (Andersen)

http://www.worldoftales.com/fairy_tales/Hans_Christian_Andersen/Andersen_fairy_tale_48.html

The Goose Girl (Grimm)

The Chimaera (Hawthorne)

Mountain Born (Yates)

The Hundred Dresses (Estes)

Brief Synopses:

Second graders are spending a year preparing for the gift of the Eucharist in the spring. It is for that reason that these books were chosen. Each of these books and stories build an awareness of truth in both the natural world as well as the supernatural realm.

George MacDonald said of his books that he wrote to appeal to the childlike in everyone in order to feed the moral imagination. For him, imagination is a power of discovery, not one of creation which he said belonged to God alone. He saw imagination as the power of perception, illuminating the mysteries hidden beneath our visible reality. *The Princess and the Goblin* is one of the most profound books about Divine Providence and how those with childlike faith can "believe without seeing."

The young princess, Irene, lives with her nurse in a castle on a rock. She is kept there to protect her from danger, but there is an evil lurking beneath the castle –goblins. Irene is protected by the beautiful woman she finds one night up in the tower. The woman says she is Irene's grandmother, but no one will believe Irene when she tells them of the visit she has with the mysterious woman. Irene is always in danger from the goblins, but time and again her grandmother (Divine Providence) keeps her safe. Even Irene's young friend Curdie, the miner's son, doesn't believe that the grandmother exists. Even when Irene takes him to visit her grandmother in the upstairs room, he cannot see her. As the grandmother explains to Irene, "seeing is not believing – it is only seeing."

This wonderful passage is such a great metaphor for our own belief in the True Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. We must not, as St. Thomas did, believe only with our eyes. We must engage our faith: "Blessed are they who have not seen and believe." The entire book is filled with the adventures of Irene and Curdie and their narrow escape from the goblins. But the greater good of this book is the message that God's Providence is real but hidden, half-concealed and often using natural things to camouflage its presence. Just as Jesus chooses to conceal himself in bread and wine, so too does God's Providence remain hidden to the eye but visible to the heart.

The story “**The Emperor’s New Clothes**” by Hans Christian Andersen is another story about telling the truth. It is only the innocent child, the one who is not looking to be seen as smarter or better than others who has the courage to tell the truth – the Emperor has no clothes!

The Grimm’s also have a wonderful story about telling the truth called “**The Goose Girl.**” Cheated out of her rightful station as princess by an evil handmaiden, the beautiful princess must serve as a goose girl in the kingdom she should have helped rule. With the help of the talking head of her horse and the ability of the prince to see her goodness, the goose girl is able to get the truth out and be restored to her true position.

A third short story, but one rich in metaphor, is “The Chimaera”, found in the ***A Wonder Book*** by Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is the fabulous myth of the heroic Bellerophon and his search for the winged horse, Pegasus. In his quest for the majestic horse, Bellerophon meets and asks several people whether they know if Pegasus still comes to drink from the Fountain of Pirene. Each of the people he asks have conflicting answers. It is only the little child playing at the fountain who says he knows the horse comes near because he has seen its reflection in the water. Of the answers Bellerophon receives, it is that of the child he believes. The story proceeds with Bellerophon and the young boy finding a way to see Pegasus with their own eyes. The winged wonder-horse descends from the sky, a gift from above, but he is only seen and appreciated by those who have the child-like simplicity to believe and the pure heart to welcome the truth.

There is a fairly short but very profound book that is perfect for the second grade as they prepare for First Communion. ***Mountain Born*** by Elizabeth Yates tells the story of the little boy Peter and his life on a sheep farm. At the age of six he is given his own little lamb, one which his father believed would die but his mother coaxed back to life. It is his own special pet, and Peter loves her for her companionship and treasures the wool they shear from her to make a coat for the winter. As the story progresses, Peter learns to be a shepherd from their hired hand, the old man, Benji. One afternoon Peter remarks to Benji that he doesn’t see him watching the sheep. Benji replies, “That’s true enough, but I have them always on my mind, That’s the shepherd’s life – to remember his sheep.” Simple, beautiful passages like this reinforce the idea of the love of the shepherd for his flock, as the Good Shepherd loves us.

The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes is priceless. Wanda Petronski wears the same dress every day to school, yet maintains she has 100 dresses in her closet. Teased and ridiculed by the others in the school her parents eventually pull her out to start again elsewhere. What the children learn, however, is the truth about Wanda’s claim. Wanda does have 100 dresses, and what dresses they are! This is a great story about seeing with the heart and not just the eyes, finding the truth in what others try to tell us.

Third Grade:

FRIENDSHIP/DUTY

Charlotte's Web (White)

Miss Rumphius (Cooney)

The Wind in the Willows (Graham)

The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse (Aesop)

Damon and Pythias (Bateman has a good re-telling)

Bambi (Salten)

Brief Synopses:

Although many children may have seen the movie **Charlotte's Web**, the book is so much more powerful that it would be a shame for anyone not to have read the story. Charlotte is more than just a friend to poor Wilbur the pig, slated for auction and being turned into bacon. She acts as a mentor to the poor pig, giving him far more in the relationship than he can give to her. What he can do, however, is love her. By gently guiding him and helping him to discover his own inner strengths and gifts (like a teacher?) she brings him to a fuller knowledge of himself. Wilbur's final gift to Charlotte, making sure her children return safely to the barn, shows his gratitude to her for all she has done.

Miss Rumphius, by Barbara Cooney, is a little story about how each person owes a duty to the world to try and give back something beautiful from the heart. Miss Rumphius works as a librarian, travels the world, and then "plants" herself in her home by the ocean. Her gift to the world that brings beauty and joy? She scatters lupine seeds all over her neighborhood, giving the gift of beauty and color that will last beyond her lifetime. It is very much like the seed we sow when we share the gift of the faith with others. We may not see all the things that come of our work, but we know we are sharing the beauty of the Word.

If there is one book about friendship that reaches not only the heart of children but adults as well, it is **The Wind in the Willows**. Aristotle once said that, "Without friends no one would choose to live." We need our friends to share our good fortune and our sorrows in life. Having friends allows us to work together towards moral perfection; well chosen friends impel us to be better than we are, to improve ourselves and grow in virtue. Good friends should diligently try to help each other attain Heaven.

Mole doesn't know what he needs or why he is so restless- he just feels an awakening in his soul one spring morning. When Mole meets Rat, his entire life changes as he learns the life of the river. The two friends join forces with Toad and Badger as the story progresses. These four friends slowly learn from each other the special gifts that each has been given. Even Toad, the wild and impetuous animal that he is, has many generous and wonderful aspects to his nature.

In friendship, it is not necessary that we are so very alike, but that we are able to respect and treasure how each one of us is different yet created for a purpose. *The Wind in the Willows* is the very book to help us laugh at our foibles, share in our tribulations, and rejoice in our triumphs.

The little fable “**The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse**” is a cautionary tale to be friends, but also to be content with what one has been given. It may seem wonderful to “go to town” and live the high life, but there are dangers inherent in the fast lane. A nice way to remind ourselves that God puts us where he needs us, and we should try to be both content and useful where we are.

The book ***Damon, Pythias, and the Test of Friendship*** is a very nice re-telling of the classic story of friendship. Pythias is condemned to die for speaking out against a tyrant. He begs leave to go home and comfort his family. His wish is denied until his best friend, Damon, steps in to take his place. Will Pythias return in time, or will Damon be put to death in his place? And what does the Emperor think about this friendship? A perfect example of “Greater love hath no man than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

Bambi is the one book on this list that will take some time to read, but it is such an excellent book to spend time upon. This, again, is not the Disney movie. One of the most profound relationships in the book is the one between Bambi and the old stag. They share something deeper than a friendship, as the old stag helps Bambi to learn the spiritual truths of the woods. The stag has lived alone for a long time, learning about not only the natural world around himself but also deepening his self knowledge.

The old stag chooses Bambi as his protégé and prepares him to take over the task of leadership. He calls Bambi to the “aleness” of the woods, to the strength he will find when he spends time alone. The old stag teaches Bambi that it is necessary to be in communion with nature by studying it and learning the beauty and the deadliness that reside in the woods.

Bambi is a profound book because it does speak to us about our own need to have “alone” time with God. We cannot hear the voice of God in our souls when the noise and confusion of the world is constantly in our ears. We need time to hear the “still, small voice” that Elijah heard by having a quiet, alone time each day.

This book can be a great vehicle for introducing the monastic life to children. Why do cloistered monks and nuns stay silent so much of the day? Why is silence important to prayer life?

Fourth Grade:

RESPONSIBILITY

Peter Pan (Barrie)

The Jungle Book (Kipling)

Farmer Boy (Wilder)

The Door in the Wall (De Angeli)

The Miser (Aesop)

Brief Synopses:

Peter Pan is absolutely a delight to read. It is so full of imaginative play and fun that it is easy to forget what this story is about – Peter’s refusal to leave the life of a child behind and move onto adulthood. Peter has Wendy to be a “mother” to the lost boys, but Wendy doesn’t want to stay a young girl forever. She desires a life much like that of her parents, even though the escape to Neverland has been a welcome one. She has indulged herself in all the childish games she delights in, but there is a time to grow up.

Although the lost boys return with Wendy to the Darling house, Peter refuses to remain there. Instead, he returns to Neverland to remain a mischievous child forever. He is a prisoner of his own passions, his own childishness. Wendy will retain her child-like love for Peter Pan and her time in Neverland, but she will grow into an adult with the joys and troubles that accompany that state of life.

Although many people see Peter’s refusal to grow up as desirable, it is not. When Peter returns to his world to play, he gives up the freedom to become something greater than just a boy enjoying himself – he gives up the freedom to move forward and grow in virtue.

In contrast, ***The Jungle Book*** tells the story of the young man cub, Mowgli, who has been raised by the wolves. Mowgli lives with the animals of the forest, learning how to survive and escape the wrath of Shere Khan, the tiger. But Mowgli’s friends know that he is growing up and he will have to return to the man village where he belongs. When he is faced with the decision to be preyed upon by the tiger or fight back like a man he instinctively uses the human weapon of fire against those clamoring for his death. Watching Mowgli grow as a person and accept his status as a man is painful, yet hopeful. Mowgli’s promises to be a good man, to be good to those in the jungle gives hope that there can be some kind of harmony for village and forest alike.

Mowgli’s adventures are only one of the stories in the book. Others, such as the exciting “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi” are cautionary tales about the natural world. This is one of those great books that introduce the reality of the red tooth and claw of nature, but in a most lyrical way. As an added bonus, Kipling’s poems about the characters are outstanding, particularly “Sea Lullaby.”

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s novel ***Farmer Boy*** tells the story of the boyhood of her husband, Almanzo. His family owns a farm in upstate New York, and the entire family works together to

provide for their comfort and needs. Almanzo's mother and father instill in him at an early age not only a work ethic, but a heart that has gratitude and love. Almanzo learns from his father how to be responsible for his own oxen – and he learns the hard way at times. The discipline may seem harsh, but it is always meted out with love. Almanzo's mother, working hard every day to provide for the needs of her family, is a tribute to mother's everywhere. *Farmer Boy* is Mrs. Wilder's acknowledgement of the good man her husband became, because of the goodness his parents demanded of him.

The Door in the Wall is a Newbery Award winner, yet it has been neglected as of late. This is the story of Robin de Bureford, the son of a knight. He has always dreamed of serving his king in the same way as his father, but his life takes another turn. Stricken with disease (possibly polio) he loses the use of his legs. With his father gone to war against the Scots and his mother in attendance to the queen, Robin is taken in by the monks and placed under the care of Brother Luke. He is a mentor to Robin, helping him to find the way that God intends him to serve his king. This is a small book, but it is quite powerful. The message of "finding the door in the wall" that God needs us to step through to serve Him and others is excellent. This is a great book for awakening the imagination to the monastic life and how important it is to listen, in silence, to hear God speaking to us.

This Aesop's fable, "**The Miser**", tells of a man who buries his gold in the ground. He comes back time and again to dig it up and count it. A thief observes him and steals it one night. The miser is wracked with grief – but a passerby asks him why he didn't keep the gold close by to use. The miser says he would never spend any of the gold – and the passerby throws a rock to him to bury. "If that is the case, cover up the stone," he says. "It is worth just as much as the gold." This is a great fable to use in conjunction with the Gospel of St. Luke – putting the candle under a bushel basket. What good is the treasure of the Word of God if we don't put it out for others to see? If we keep our treasure hidden and just for ourselves, how can we be called disciples of Christ?

Fifth Grade:

COURAGE

Twenty and Ten (Bishop)

The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe (Lewis)

Prince Caspian (Lewis)

The Winged Watchman (van Stockum)

Belling the Cat (Aesop)

Brief Synopses:

World War II and the treatment of the Jews by the Nazi's can be an overwhelming topic for young children. Claire Hutchett Bishop's *Twenty and Ten* is one of the most beautiful and gentle introductions to that terrible war and the inhumanity of man. Twenty French children have been sent to the countryside under the care of Sister Gabrielle. Although they do not have much to eat, they do have their lively imaginations. They spend the days playing, sometimes acting out the Bible stories that Sister has read to them. Into their rather quiet lives comes a French Resistance soldier, asking them to take in ten Jewish children who are being sought by the Nazis. Sister and the children agree, sharing their food and blankets with the newcomers. When Sister goes to the village for mail and food items, she is arrested and detained, leaving the children alone on the hill. Two soldiers arrive at the school, sure that the Jewish children are hiding there. What happens when they begin questioning and intimidating the children is nothing short of a small miracle. This is one of those books that begs the question, "What would I do in this situation? Would I lay down my life for my brother? And who is my brother?"

There are two of the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis on the list for fifth grade, because they are so well written and have so much Christian imagery that they both should be read. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is the introduction of the Pevensie children to the world of Narnia and the great lion, Aslan. This is a book with big themes: sin, repentance, suffering, and forgiveness.

Edmund, one of the four children, suffers from self-centeredness and pride. He sulkily wishes to be able to show up his older brother Peter, to be the one who calls the shots and make others subservient to his will. When Edmund quietly follows Lucy, his younger sister, into Narnia, he meets up with the beautiful but cold White Witch.

The White Witch preys on Edmund by offering him food – Turkish delight – and Edmund eats until he is no longer cold or afraid. His hunger is fed with a frothy delight of food, but nothing substantial. In fact, Lewis writes, "the more he ate the more he wanted to eat." The emptiness inside of him cannot be filled with the empty lies of the White Witch. Edmund returns from Narnia to his world, lying about having been there. All he can think about is having more Turkish delight – he is addicted to the emptiness (sin) and what it promises.

Edmund is a character who is easy to identify with – we all feel disenfranchised, angry, unappreciated by others at times. However, it is the response we give – either sullen and sulky or faithful and hopeful that defines who we are. Evil in Narnia is vanquished, just as in our world, when the soul turns away from pride and selfishness and turns toward God.

The second of the Narnia books, ***Prince Caspian***, tells of the return of the Pevensie children to their beloved land. But time has moved at different speeds – things have changed in Narnia. Much time has passed and the children must assume their roles again as kings and queens of Narnia to help Prince Caspian regain his rightful place as ruler. This story really centers on Lucy, the youngest of the family. It is Lucy who can see the truth in what is going on in Narnia (even her name is a hint: Lu-cy). She can see Aslan when the others cannot, because her heart is pure and she has great faith.

At a crucial point in the book, Lucy cannot get the others to follow what she know in her heart to be the path up through the mountains that Aslan wants them to take. When she is confronted by Aslan in the night, she tries to make excuses for her own refusal to take the right road. But Lucy overcomes her fear and strengthened by her love of Aslan, she is able to persuade them to follow her as she follows the lion. She is the smallest, yet the bravest and most steadfast of the group. Her character definitely makes thinking about young martyrs much more clear – they had their eyes on He whom they could see.

Lewis did intend for these books to have strong Christian imagery, but they also have great adventure and admirable characters. Even though many kids will have seen the movies made from these books (and they were fairly good), there is no substitute for the rich imagery in the books themselves.

The Winged Watchman by Hilda van Stockum is a look at the family life of the Verhagen family during the Nazi occupation of Holland. Ten year old Joris and his family live in one of the windmills out on the dikes – one of the “winged watchmen.” He can barely remember a time that the Nazis and the war have not been a part of his life. As he has grown older he has watched and observed how the different families and people of his village respond to the Germans. His own mother takes in a little Jewish baby, hidden in the bushes by her mother, on the day the Nazis take away the rest of the family.

Joris learns that his family is even more courageous than he has dreamed – they are a part of the Dutch Resistance, helping downed flyers escape from Holland. But there are others in their villages who have no qualms about aiding and abetting the Germans. This is another of those books that evoke the questions about how we would react in a similar situation. Do we protect ourselves, or do we lay down our lives for others? How do we do that in our own lives right now? Do we sacrifice for others? Forego pleasures to give our help to others? This is a great book for stimulating discussion.

A great little Aesop’s fable, “**Belling the Cat**,” is perfect for a discussion of courage. The mice all agree it would be wonderful to put a bell on the cat so they could hear her coming, but who will risk his life to do the deed? A nice way to think about the consequences of our actions, and think about the difference between courage and foolish bravado.

Sixth Grade:

CHARITY/KINDNESS

The Good Master (Seredy)

The Railway Children (Nesbit)

The Secret Garden (Burnett)

The Kitchen Madonna (Godden)

Boys and the Frogs (Aesop)

Brief Synopses:

Set in pre-World War I Hungary, ***The Good Master*** by Kate Seredy introduces us to the high spirited Kate, her cousin Janci, and her loving uncle and aunt. Kate's mother is dead and her father decides that he is gone too much of the time to take care of her properly. She is sent to live with her Uncle Marton on his ranch. Janci, her boy cousin, is trying his hardest to become accepted as a man on the ranch, and his newly arrived cousin Kate is making that nearly impossible. He had expected a quiet, refined little girl to come to their home, but they get an irrepressible tomboy with a quick wit and an even quicker temper.

Janci and Kate start out fierce enemies, but they learn from each other and become heart-felt friends. Kate helps Janci to see the beauty of his life on the ranch, and Janci helps Kate learn to tone down her high-spirits and control her anger. Both of them are guided throughout the year they spend together by the "Good Master," Uncle Marton. This book captures a way of life in Hungary that was destroyed by the war. It is truly a book from which we can learn compassion and charity, laced with prudence and good judgment.

The Railway Children by E. Nesbit is a simple story about three children who are fairly well off, until their father is arrested for a crime he did not commit. They have to move to the country to make ends meet, and their mother works on her writing. Much of the story is based on Nesbit's own childhood, so it rings quite true. The children are not perfect – they argue and emote, occasionally making poor choices. However, their respect and love as well as admiration for their parents is unmistakable. They are guided by the steady faith of their mother that things will come out alright in the end.

The children not only show kindness to others in the story, but kindness is shown to them several times in their hour of need. This is a book of a simpler time, and it moves at a slower pace. However, it is a story that one remembers long after the book is closed. Nesbit's writing is so effortless it is a joy to read.

Mary Lennox, a spoiled ten- year- old orphan, comes from India to live in England with her nearest relative. Unlike Uncle Marton in *The Good Master*, Mary's new guardian is never at

home because he is mourning still, after ten years, the death of his wife. He neglects his own son, Colin, whose birth caused the loss of his wife. Mary comes into this mix with little capacity for friendship, no curiosity, no desire to play, and really, no imagination. She has no life of the child, until she is given a jump rope and she goes outside to learn to skip it. Mary's outdoor play leads her to the garden of the house, which lies untended behind a wall. Before long, Mary will find the key to ***The Secret Garden*** and help the whole family recover from the pain of loss. Mary will share the garden with both Dickon, her friend who loves plants and animals, and Colin, her sickly cousin who at ten years of age is sure he is ready to die. The magic of the garden reinvigorates the lives of all the children. Even Colin's father is healed, seeing the beautiful garden restored to the beauty it once had under his wife's caring hands. This is a wonderful book about the power that love has over the most tragic of situations. The children, in their innocence, transform themselves, each other, and those around them by simply being happy children.

This is a book that also has not been on reading lists lately, but it should be. ***The Kitchen Madonna*** by Rumer Godden is the story of two children whose parents are very busy with their jobs as architects. Gregory and Janet are left in the care of Marta the Ukrainian woman who cooks for them, cleans for them, and is always there for them. But Marta is sad- she longs for an icon for her kitchen, like there was in the old country. She needs a kitchen Madonna. Gregory is a rather aloof child, not very friendly towards others; however, he is moved by his love for Marta and his fear that she will leave them. He sets out to find for her a real kitchen Madonna, an icon that will make her heart happy again. The journey will not be easy as he takes his precocious sister all over London to find the right gift. Gregory is met with difficulties that test his resourcefulness and his diligence, but his love is greater than his fear. This is a wonderful book about the power of love – something we sometimes forget as we grow older.

Another short Aesop's fable, "**The Boys and the Frogs**" is a gentle reminder about kindness towards everyone. This little story tells of boys throwing rocks into the pond, skipping them and making splashes. Finally, a brave frog puts his head out and asks them to stop, reminding them that what is fun for one group, may be the cause of unhappiness for another.

Seventh Grade:

Love of Family/Gratitude

Where the Red Fern Grows (Rawls)

Little Women (Alcott)

The Long Winter (Wilder)

The Singing Tree (Seredy)

The Fisherman and His Wife (Grimm)

Brief Synopses:

The book ***Where the Red Fern Grows*** is such a good book that it could be in many different categories. It is here with family life and gratitude because Billy and his family all profit from the love of Billy and his dogs. Billy is such a memorable character as he grows in wisdom and charity, diligence and faith - and all through his relationships with his two hunting hounds, Old Dan and Little Ann.

Billy's mother desperately wants to move the family out of the back woods and into the city where they can get a better education. Billy love the way of life in the hills and he especially loves his dogs. He has no intention of leaving them behind and heading for the city.

Billy has given totally of himself for the dogs, too. He worked hard for two years saving the money to buy them, working any odd jobs he can find. Once he has enough money, he brings the puppies home and carefully trains them, promising them he will work as hard for them as they work for him. Billy keeps his word to his dogs, even when it means chopping down a tree to get at a raccoon. The chopping leaves Billy's hands sore and blistered, but his dogs know he will give of himself for them.

Eventually Billy's dogs grow into two of the best hunters in the area. They win a hunting competition that carries with it a sizeable cash prize. Now the family has the means to move to the city, but Billy refuses to go and plans to stay behind, alone, with his dogs. His mother's heart is broken, but she doesn't know how to change his mind. One night, the dogs protect Billy from a mountain lion and Old Dan lays down his life for his master. When he dies, Little Ann dies too, of grief. With the death of Billy's dogs there is no longer any reason to stay on the farm; Billy buries the dogs and leaves with his family. The red fern growing above the graves of the dogs is a testament of their love for one another, and Billy is comforted.

In Louisa May Alcott's ***Little Women*** the home and family are equated with the richness of a harvest and the fruitfulness of harmonious love between mother and father, and parents and children. Mrs. March constantly reminds the girls of their duty to be the kind of women that would make their father proud. The girls follow the example of their mother, sharing their own things with those less fortunate, even though they are hardly living in luxury. Still, they have a roof over their heads, food on the table, and their father is surviving the war.

The girls are definitely NOT goody-goodies. There is vanity, selfishness, anger, snappishness, and jealousy raising their ugly heads from time to time. It is the love the girls have for their

parents, especially their mother, which makes them sorry for their actions. Her approval is so important to them because she has set an example of goodness herself. We watch in particular, Jo, learning to control her passions and becoming a steady, focused young woman. By the chapter of the book, "Harvesttime," Mrs. March tells her girls that she can wish no greater happiness for them than the joy of seeing them with their own families, filling their own homes with love for one another.

While a story of home life may seem tame, *Little Women* definitely demonstrates that life within a devoted family is anything but that. We see the March girls displaying happiness, imagination, hospitality and energy. Their home is definitely an example of being a "castle," full of the riches God sends to those who accept them.

Although it is wonderful to read the entire series of the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, if there is one of the books about her family that stands out as a testament to family love it is ***The Long Winter***. Pa Ingalls is the first to notice that something is different about the way nature is preparing for the coming winter. He draws Laura's attention to the thickness of the muskrat houses in the slough. The animals use their instinct, Pa tells Laura, to know how to build for a bad winter. Laura asks why God doesn't just tell us the same way, and Pa tells her that, "We're not animals...That means we got to take care of ourselves." Laura asks him if God takes care of us, and Pa answers her, "He does, so far as we do what's right. And he gives us a conscience and brain to know what's right...That's the difference between us and everything in creation."

Before the long winter of 1880-1881 is through, the small population of Dakota Territory inhabitants will find out how to use the good sense and reason God has given them, along with the charity He demands of them. How do we spend our long winters? Even with the creature comforts we enjoy – a roof over our heads, heat, lights, food – do we find time to love our families or fret about the time we "have to" spend together?

The Singing Tree can be read as a stand-alone story, but it is even more enjoyable if you have read *The Good Master*. This book deals with the First World War and the effect it had on the peace-loving Hungarian farm families, pushed into the conflict. This is a more serious book, one which openly presents the hardships that war brings upon the young and innocent. The book is never preachy, just very matter of fact about the cost of war and the hope that men can learn to live together.

As the war progresses in the book, Janci's father is called to serve and his mother is left to run the farm with Janci as her trusted overseer. They take in refugees from the war – from little German refugees to Russian POW's. Everyone works together to make sure the crops and animals are taken care of so there will be enough to eat. Even though they may have been enemies in battle, the message is clear that we are all brothers in Christ and working together as a family makes more sense than shooting each other. This is a great book to introduce WWI and the sorrow it brought to Europe, destroying a way of life for so many families.

It is good to read a story such as "**The Fisherman and His Wife**", because it really does remind us of our own ingratitude – but in a way that makes us laugh. The Fisherman catches a magic fish who promises to fulfill wishes if the Fisherman will throw him back. The Fisherman hurries home to his modest little house and tells his wife of their good fortune. Immediately she orders new houses and better positions in life on a daily basis. The good little fish does his best to accommodate her, even letting her be Pope and sit on the Papal throne. But when she decides to rule all creation – well, there is only one thing the fish can do. This is

a great story for examining ourselves and our response to the good things we receive daily from God

Eighth Grade:

JUSTICE/FORTITUDE

The Bronze Bow (Speare)

Lilies of the Field (Barrett)

The Trumpeter of Krakow (Kelly)

The Scarlet Pimpernel (Orczy)

Brief Synopses:

Daniel bar Jamin is a young man who has a right to his anger – he watched Roman soldiers crucify his father. He is consumed by hatred and plots with a band of thieves to help drive the Romans from his country. Yet, he continually is drawn to hear the teachings of the Rabbi, Jesus, whose words stir his heart but do not seem to help him with his anger. Daniel wants Jesus to be a leader who will lead the men to conquer their enemies, yet Jesus talks of forgiveness – something Daniel know he will never have.

The Bronze Bow won the Newbery Medal in 1962, and it is no surprise why. It is such a powerfully written story about seeking justice. Daniel thinks that he is only after that very thing, justice, but is he? Rather, is it possible he wants vengeance, which belongs to God alone. Daniel is responsible for his sister, Leah, who is mentally fragile from the death of her father. This, too, fills him with anger. How can he fight these Romans when he has to care for a frightened, sick girl? And how can he cope with the idea that a Roman soldier has feelings for his sister? Love alone, the love of Jesus for all mankind, will bring the change.

The Lilies of the Field is such a short novel it is amazing that so much is packed into it. Homer Smith, a black Baptist man, fresh out of the army, comes driving through a town in the Southwest in his station wagon. He sees some women working in the fields of a small farm and notices they could use some handy work on their fence. Needing a little cash and being handy with a hammer, he stops to offer his services.

Mother Maria, the head of the little convent that Homer has stopped by, believes that Homer is a gift from God. She and her small cadre of Catholic sisters are refugees from East Germany and have come to this country to start a school and home for wayward young men. One thing they need desperately? A chapel. One thing they do not have much of? Money. But Mother Maria has something more important than money – she has faith.

Homer has faith, too, but he cannot understand how God expects him to build a chapel for these sisters with no money and no materials. Mother Maria knows – God will provide everything they need. She makes her case with the Bible: “Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Luke 12:27).

Homer and Mother Maria engage in a battle of the wills with one another, with a truce finally declared. However, when Homer and Mother Maria join forces against the people of the town

who don't believe Homer and Mother Maria can produce a chapel – watch out! The movie version of this story is almost as good as the book. Sidney Poitier is wonderful as Homer. Treat the class to a viewing of it after you've finished reading.

According to legend, in the 13th century (1241), a Polish boy was killed by the arrow of an invading Tartar from the East, silencing his trumpet a few notes short of completion of the "Heynal," the Hymn to Our Lady, as he stood on a little balcony of the Church of Our Lady Mary in Krakow, Poland. Ever since that event all trumpeters have stopped at the same point in the Heynal as it is sounded four times on the hour, to the four directions, all day and night as a signal that all is well. Trumpeters (local firemen) play the Heynal every hour in Krakow even to this day.

Celebrate our new Polish Saint, John Paul II, by reading ***The Trumpeter of Krakow*** by Eric P. Kelly. Set in 1460, it is the story of the Polish Charnetski family who flee the Ukraine after their farm is burned by the Tartars. The Charnetskis are the keepers of a mysterious item that the Tartar chief wants to get his hands on, the Great Tarnov Crystal.

Along the way young Joseph Charnetski will meet Father Jan Kanty (St. Jan Kanty) as well as Nicholas Copernicus. While hiding from the murderous Tartar chief, Peter of the Button Face, the Chanetskis will also have to contend with alchemists, hypnotists, and an assortment of evil and strange characters all trying to get their hands on the crystal.

It will take all the courage and fortitude young Joseph has save his father, the crystal, and even the city of Krakow. This is a wonderful adventure that gives us insight into the Poles and their solid faith and courage – as we witnessed with our beloved John Paul II.

Many students in high school read A Tale of Two Cities, but they often are unaware of how demonically inspired the French Revolution really was. Without being graphically violent, the Baroness Orczy has given a very good picture of the terror of the Revolution in her exciting book, ***The Scarlet Pimpernel***. All over Paris the leaders of the bloody revolution are seeking the Englishman who helps French aristocrats flee France and the monstrous guillotine. He is known only as the Scarlet Pimpernel, and there is a price on his head.

Who is he? One whom many consider nothing more than a silly English aristocrat, interested only in his own enjoyment. His brilliance lies in his ability to disguise his true identity – but will he be caught? Why does he feel compelled to free those aristocrats slated to die in Paris? And why risk his own life? This is an exciting and fast-moving read that hopefully, will leave students wanting to know more about this period in our Church history.

Conclusion

Although there are quite a few books on the preceding pages, there are many others that should be on the shelves in all Catholic school libraries. While it may be true that young people want to read the newest “hot” books, it is questionable as to whether they should be promoted so readily in our Catholic schools. Some people feel that it doesn’t matter what a child reads, just as long as they are reading something, anything.

Following that reasoning, it shouldn’t matter what we eat, how we entertain ourselves, whether or not we go to Mass. As long as we’re doing something, it doesn’t matter what it is. That is an absurd road to go down. Of course it matters what we do with our minds, because they are to be used for making prudent decisions about our lives. Filling our heads with nothing but empty at best and questionable at worst stories when we are young doesn’t help us to form our moral consciences. Childhood is so brief – we should use this short window of time to fill hearts and minds with the “truest of true things.”

This paper began with the discussion of the moral imagination, which is a way of looking at life, making metaphors out of images. As we grow, these metaphors find a moral correspondence in experience. The most important word here is, again, “metaphor.” It has its root meaning in the Greek and is a “carrying over” or carrying beyond.” It lifts our mind up from one thing to another to another, linking them by suggesting a likeness. The more we shape the moral imaginations of Catholic students, the easier it should be for them to choose and employ the good, the true, and the beautiful in their lives as they link experience from childhood to the world they experience as young adults and beyond.

I return once more to Dr. Guroian and a quote from his book, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*:

“Children are vitally concerned with distinguishing good from evil and truth from falsehood. This need to make moral distinctions is a gift, a grace, that human beings are given at the start of their lives.” (pg. 3)

The innate moral sense that we are all born with, if not tended carefully, will fail to put down roots into our very beings. Nourishing the moral imagination is not something we might do, or we could do, it is something we must do. And, thankfully, it is a pleasant task for both the child and the adult. Let us end with another quote from Flannery O’Connor. Why are stories so important to children? And why are good stories the best?

“A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way...”

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