

4.4 Putting It All Together

In considering the aesthetic qualities of good children's books, we have looked at the various elements that go into all quality literature. Bruno Bettelheim offers a clear summary of what these elements add up to for children:

For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems that perturb him. (1976, p. 5)

We can break Bettelheim's summary down into a list of things to consider as we evaluate the books we choose to share with children. As with picturebooks, not all books will contain all of these elements, but they offer us guidelines as we make our curricular decisions.

Guidelines for Evaluating Characteristics of Quality Children's Literature

Does the book or poem stimulate children's imagination?

- Does the book or poem offer novel situations, unfamiliar settings, fresh perspectives?
- Does it propose innovative solutions and/or suggest multiple possibilities for problem solving?
- Does it encourage readers to see the world in a new way?

Does the book or poem help children develop their intellect?

- Is the vocabulary challenging and colorful?
- Does the book or poem teach children something about the natural world, history, or relationships?
- Does the book or poem raise questions that invite readers to explore a subject further?

Does the book or poem help children clarify their emotions?

- Are emotional states made clear either through naming or effective illustration?
- Are the connections between the character's emotional states and motivations clear?

- Is there some level of exaggeration (but not necessarily hyperbole) to enable the character's emotional state to be clearly experienced?
- Does the character respond to situations realistically and appropriately, and if not, are his or her reasons and consequences clearly understandable?

Is the story or poem attuned to children's anxieties and aspirations?

- Are the characters' fears likely to be understood by readers, given their own developmental age?
- Do the characters have some means of support to help cope with fears within the story or poem?
- Can readers conceive of their own way out of the character's fear? Is there a path that will lead to what they hope will happen in the end?

Does the story give full recognition to children's difficulties?

At the level of the story or poem:

- Are characters' fears acknowledged as credible in the context of the story or poem?
- Is the conflict presented as sufficiently difficult for readers to feel empathy?

At the level of the reading:

- Are there sufficient supports (illustrations, context clues, explanations) to aid readers in comprehension of unfamiliar material?

Does the book or poem suggest solutions to the problems that perturb the character, and, by extension, the readers?

- Is a solution possible for the character within the terms of the story or poem, or must a miracle or some other unlikely event occur for the character to get out of his or her predicament?
- Does the character have sufficient help and support, whether from friends or from native ingenuity?
- Are several possible solutions proposed, considered, and rejected before a solution is effected?