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## The Magic Bookshelf

*I am well aware not only of the importance of children—whom we naturally cherish and who also embody our hopes for the future—but also of the importance of what we provide for them in the way of art; and I realize that we are competing with a lot of cultural influences, some of which beguile them in false directions.*

—William Steig, author of *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*  
and *Brave Irene*

Books are magical. They comfort us when we feel sad, uplift us in times of joy, and transport us to other times and places. We feel this magic as adults. But for children, the magic is much stronger. Young imaginations skip easily from reality to fantasy, and live safely in both worlds. And books can move our children through the transitions and phases of life unlike anything else.

This book is about a “Magic Bookshelf,” which is both a literal and fanciful concept that springs from a certain philosophy on reading and the literature of childhood. Childhood is a fleeting genie—once it escapes the bottle, it’s gone. When high school comes, our children will not go back and read the juvenile classics that could otherwise have enriched their lives. Quite simply,

childhood is too brief to be squandered on reading material that doesn't challenge and engage the mind and imagination.

In a concrete sense, a Magic Bookshelf consists of the good books we encounter—the ones we own, those read to us, and those we borrow from libraries and friends. But in a larger sense, a Magic Bookshelf exists in the mind: it's the collection of rich stories, characters, and ideas that remain with us long after the books have been read, that becomes a part of us, that continues to delight and influence us for the rest of our days. Consider the anecdote about the elderly man who reflects on the many interesting people he's met during his life. Then it dawns on him that half of them were characters from books.

A Magic Bookshelf can become a fixture in any household. It's never too soon, or too late, to build it. In fact, you may already have the beginnings of one in your house. Perhaps you've saved some treasured books from your own childhood. Maybe your child has already received special books as gifts. It could be you've picked up a few promising-looking books with well-turned pages at a recent garage or library sale, or attractive overstocks at a local bookstore.

But even if your child already has lots of books, chances are these would-be good friends sit neglected, crowded out by faddish series books, pre-pre teen fan magazines, and flashy electronics.

The truth is, there are thousands of well-written, thoughtfully conceived books with richly textured plots and characters for your child to read and enjoy, and be positively influenced by. The problem is, how do you lead your child to them? How do you even find these "good books" amid the mass-marketing bells and whistles blaring from the glossy new children's books in the stores? Where's the true "good stuff" and how can you get your hands on it?

Moreover, how can books compete with the many distractions and complications of modern life, when many children don't even make it home until after school enrichment programs, or sports activities, and the like?

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Our family's Magic Bookshelf first formally materialized in my first marriage, when I started trying to find challenging and interesting books to introduce to my stepson Allen, then eight years old. The roots of this mission sprang from my own childhood. I'd held on to favorite books from my elementary and middle school years, with their lovingly worn pages, memorized plot lines, and familiar drawings—*The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Secret Garden*, and dozens of others. My stepfather, a rare book dealer, had contributed significantly to this collection with first edition classics.

We started referring to the shelf that contained my prized book collection as the Magic Bookshelf because every book we pulled out for Allen to read turned out to be a winner. And it gave way to a whole new way of seeing books.

Before this phenomenon, outgoing, city-bred Allen favored athletics and math, but had developed good listening skills by having been read aloud to since babyhood. Allen's competitive nature also made him eager to learn to read well in school, to keep up. But he wasn't the natural reader his father and I seemed to have been in our childhoods.

When he'd go to the library with us, or visit his school library, he'd try to give out-of-class reading a stab. It was the height of popularity for the *Goosebumps* series. Allen would check out a big stack of those paperbacks, which he would dutifully begin to read. But he never finished them. We figured he read the first two chapters of every *Goosebumps* book published. And that was no small number. But he never finished them...

One day I pulled my worn brown jacketless hardcover copy of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* from the "Magic Bookshelf." Unsure if Allen could read this comparatively challenging book for himself, his dad began reading it to him at night when Allen came over for his regular visits. (Chapter 12, *If Your Child Does Not Live with You*, describes how you don't have to see your child every day to make this work.)

Each night Allen was with us, they'd read more of this wonderful book. They even spent some sunny Saturday afternoons indoors reading and laughing out loud at the story and its marvelous, mouth-watering images—golden tickets, Square Candies that Look 'Round, Everlasting Gobstoppers, a chocolate river... Two movie incarnations, despite occasional wit and eye-popping special effects, still can't match the fantastic world Dahl's words alone created.

But here's the real magic. Allen soon went to the library and checked out more Roald Dahl books to read for himself. These and other books we thought were above his reading level were read start to finish within days. Without his realizing it, hours would go by, during which he would occasionally look up and proudly say, "I've read 100 more pages." He still kept up with his old favorite pursuits, but the reading seemed to add a new dimension to his personality and his life. It became a part of his identity, and it stuck—today he is a sophomore in the Honors College of the University of Georgia. And he gives his little brothers books on every gift-giving occasion.

That is Allen's story of his Magic Bookshelf. But we took the same literary approach with Riley, now eleven (just a baby when the first edition of *The Magic Bookshelf* was published) and Thomas, nine.

As in Allen's younger world, the pulpy books that are cranked out like clockwork, often based on TV series or electronic games, reign supreme in the youth book market. They even dominate the school library. Like the homes of many other families, ours has its share of dog-eared Pokémon guides scattered about.

But Riley and Thomas had an advantage from the get-go in combating the tidal wave of junk lit, because we'd learned how to separate the winners from the time-wasters. Since their babyhoods, we've read scores of books from the growing Magic Bookshelf: scads of picture books on up through novels... *The Borrowers*... *The Mouse & the Motorcycle*... *Holes*... *Mr. Popper's Penguins*... *From the*

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*Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler... The Tale of Despereaux... The Invention of Hugo Cabret...* mixing old with new.

When they go to the library or bookstore, the boys usually come home with good choices (though the occasional pulpy choice causes no more harm than the occasional candy bar). And I believe this can be so for many other children, no matter what age they get started. They just need to find, or be shown, the path to the books that will engage them.

## Why “Good” Books?

Many of us grew up on comic books, “dime store” mysteries, maybe some teen romance, and other popular pulpy fare. Since modern substitutes are so easily found (an understatement if you’ve noted the legions of merchandise-based series books on the market these days), why should you worry about whether your children read the “good stuff”? Aren’t they better off mastering the latest computer programs, at least improving their hand-eye coordination? Or how about watching “educational” TV programming on an ever-widening spectrum of channels? Isn’t the future in technology anyway?

The answer is no, not in a substantial sense, and particularly not when it comes to succeeding in school, retaining mind-building information, and ultimately taking the career paths of their choice.

Look at your state’s universities and check out their average SAT scores. While the news organizations bemoan the fact that test scores are sinking, college administrators have a different story to tell. Even formerly less competitive state-supported schools are reporting their freshmen arrive bearing better entrance scores and high school grades than ever before. And the best school in your state may well be turning away applicants who would have easily made the cut a decade ago.

In addition, most people can forget out-of-state schools. To better serve students who live in-state, many schools are hiking out-of-state tuition by more than 10 percent a year.

Is your child ready to compete in this new, competitive world? Are you sure she has the tools it will take to make it?

Reading, and particularly reading high-quality literature, has the pleasant side benefit of being a proven way to give your child a better shot at staying with the tide, by unharnessing his imagination, offering him new confidence that comes with broadened experience, and helping him acquire the grammar and spelling skills necessary to survive the middle grades.

A 2005 study cited a “significant relationship” between knowledge of quality children’s book titles and academic performance of fourth- through sixth graders. Specifically, scores for these children were far higher in phonics, spelling, verbal fluency, vocabulary, and general information.<sup>1</sup>

But most of all, high-quality reading will give him stories that will stay in his heart for the rest of his life.

“High quality” doesn’t just mean the classic books, or those judged best by panels of adult critics, or dry-as-dust “read this because it’s good for you” fare. This means well-written—that is not to say hard to read—books with fantastic stories that send children to new worlds full of fresh concepts, and that introduce captivating characters who face challenges and situations readers may or may not be facing themselves. These are books that have been warmly embraced by all kinds of modern children, but which, because of their flashily displayed, “quick fix” competition, too often sit in shadow on the bookstore shelves.

Parents often attribute their children’s resistance to reading good books to a mere preference for the pulp. “I want them to like

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<sup>1</sup>Fontina L. Rashid and Rose A. Sevcik, “Relationship Between Home Literacy Environment and Reading Achievement in Children with Reading Disabilities,” *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, January 1, 2005.

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to read,” they explain. “Those other books bore them. I don’t want to spoil their already-fragile interest.”

There’s one main reason why competent readers turn down better-quality books for mass-market products. It’s the same reason children prefer TV. It’s easier. It requires hardly any thought. And it’s human nature to prefer to coast. But we all know this world requires too much of one’s wits to effectively live that way.

## Hey, Wait Up!

The issue of children neglecting more challenging books can be virtually avoided with a lifestyle that starts them off very young. For older children, it’s a bit trickier—but it can be done!

We should never tell children the sub-literature they’re reading is “trash”—even if we think it is. This would, of course, trigger negative attitudes toward the activity in general, and perhaps seriously wound their pride. Too, such abject disapproval may well drive them in the opposite direction. As children’s author Katherine Paterson cautions: “If we prescribe books as medicine, our children have a perfect right to refuse the nasty-tasting spoon.”<sup>2</sup>

The way to approach such a situation is to find—or best, help your children “happen upon”—better substitutes. (See Chapters 4 and 5.)

Unfortunately, many children picture an adult’s idea of “better” as bearing golden seal stickers or having crowds of teachers, mentors, and librarians whistling and applauding behind the superior tome. It’s up to us to prove to children a book is better because it offers a better subject, a better story, better characters, and better ideas to think about.

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<sup>2</sup> Katherine Paterson, *Gates of Excellence: On Reading and Writing Books for Children* (New York: Dutton, 1998), p. 17.

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In my view, it's a cop-out to say, "She should read what she wants. I don't want to force it." You don't have to force. What you do have to do is show your child there are finer books out there she will enjoy just as much, maybe more. Sure, she can keep up her comic book collection. But how will she know there's anything else?

It's critical to note a child doesn't have to be college-bound or among the brightest in his class to benefit greatly from reading good literature. In fact, this truth about better books holds just as firmly when a child is at the *bottom* of the class. Good books are written for all children. Good books help a child be the best *he* can be. But though your child certainly doesn't have to know it, this too is urgent business. Childhood is fleeting. Just think of your own life—how long did your childhood seem to last?

The late children's book editor and author Jean Karl said, "A good book respects a child's intelligence, his pride, his dignity, and most of all his individuality and his capacity to become."<sup>3</sup>

This guide shows parents how to offer the invaluable tools reading can give your child. We're not talking about teaching children how to read in general, or even just how to interest them in reading for the sake of it. We're talking about teaching children *to read on higher content levels, to read good books.*

## The Book Scene Today

Most of us grew up in at least slightly simpler times. The personal computer explosion, the dawn of the Internet, and even cable TV caught hold after many of us were in our teens or even on our own. But whether we're now in our twenties or sixties, there seemed not to be quite so much competition for our time.

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Karl, *From Childhood to Childhood: Children's Books and Their Creators* (New York: John Day, 1971), p. 9.

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Yet our culture is still very book-oriented, and library traffic remains high. Look at one of the biggest super-powers of the Internet—Amazon.com, which started out and still remains focused as a book-seller. The book industry is undeniably thriving, and children’s books are especially hot. According to publishing experts R.R. Bowker, there are currently more than 385,000 children’s books in print! (This number has actually doubled in the ten years since *The Magic Bookshelf’s* first edition.) And this figure doesn’t include the scads of out-of-print, perennially popular books that still line library shelves.

Compare this with the 35,000 books in print in the early 1970s. (Even then, books like *Down the Rabbit Hole: Adventures and Misadventures in the Realm of Children’s Literature* by Selma G. Lanes were being written to help parents navigate the children’s book maze.)

Bookstores continue to be glutted with new additions to their collections. But there’s a big difference between what’s big business and what’s worth the money. Fortunately there are some very good books being published today. There are also many painfully mediocre books being published—and bought—as well. Too many publishers are interested in sales and merchandising alone. They will rarely introduce something new and innovative, in favor of reissuing older books in cheap new editions, or imitating what has been popular before, adhering to the formula.

Publishers such as these are usually looking for the sure sell. Children’s books by big names and celebrities like Jamie Lee Curtis, Madonna, Maria Shriver, Bill Cosby, and even Jerry Seinfeld are rushed into print. Only occasionally is an unknown writer lucky enough to be “discovered” by an open-minded editor determined to do something different.

Meanwhile, book merchandising is rampant. For example, franchise-type series based on TV—think *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Scooby Doo*, *Hannah Montana*—are some of the hottest sellers for children today. (I don’t mean to unfairly poke a finger at these series; there are many other spun sugar spin-offs of dozens of other characters

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plucked from TV series, cartoons, and even video games.) Written by a host of different authors whose chief requirement is to generate quick copy, these books are of inferior quality but sell by the boatload. Cheap ancillary products like diaries, novelty book-of-the-month clubs, toy tie-ins, and Web sites fuel the marketing frenzy.

The creators make a killing. But is reading these books doing any more for young people than easily passing the time or offering a juvenile version of “guilty pleasure” reading? Are there really any clever ideas or intriguing characters introduced in them? (And would we want our children to emulate these one-dimensional, plastic-perfect characters and their phony friends anyway?)

There definitely is a place, and a need, for escape reading. We all enjoy our “beach blanket” books, and giving our brains a break. In our own youths most of us probably blazed through quickie books based on popular movies, or comic books, or dime-a-dozen mystery novels. It’s not the intention here to put down all the current trendy books. And as series go, some, like Beverly Cleary’s Klickitat Street gang (beginning with *Henry Huggins*), started out as captivating stories spun by one talented writer and retained the high standard (and the same writer). The *Harry Potter* series, a carefully conceived saga, is also a different animal. *The Magic Treehouse* series, in my opinion, doesn’t offer a high quality of writing to emulate but does offer opportunities to learn about other cultures, countries, and times in history in a fun and innovative setting.

But with many protracted series, when the merchandising steps in and the original writer can no longer keep up with the demand—or if the book was just a mere product in the first place—the books are farmed out, with any quality diluted, and the books become shells of the original work. They become mere products.

Meanwhile, there are so many good books that could quite possibly mean a great deal to our children, and even stick in the backs of their minds for the rest of their lives... *if they were read.*

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Many parents, writers of magazine articles, and even educators make the claim that “any reading is good reading.” I don’t believe this is so. Allowing children to always choose sub-par reading material will not only foster sub-par language skills, but deny them the opportunity to experience the real magic reading can offer.

This book was written to help parents and other guardians guide children to literature that is truly special, in a natural and non-didactic way. In back, you’ll find a comprehensive book list. (It is by no means a definitive list, but it suggests books that are beloved by children, as well as recommended by literary experts, educators, and other parents.) Once on the right path, your children will learn to make wonderful choices for themselves.

In the end, I hope everyone can experience the great joy and lifelong benefits of having their own personal Magic Bookshelves—both material and of the mind.

*WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED THIS EXCERPT.*

*DON'T LET ONE OF THE RICHEST PARTS OF CHILDHOOD PASS YOUR CHILD BY. GET YOUR COPY OF **THE NEW MAGIC BOOKSHELF** AND BEGIN TRANSFORMING YOUR CHILD'S LITERARY LIFE TODAY!*