



# Sowing the Seeds Of Virtue

## The Power of Great Children's Books

A 7-part series from *Breakpoint* with Chuck Colson,  
a daily radio commentary on faith and culture.

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## 1. Undergraduates without Chests "Tending the Heart of Virtue"

By Chuck Colson|Published Date: June 01, 1999

When Vigen Guroian set out to teach a class on children's literature to his undergraduate students at Loyola College in Maryland, he invited his daughter's fourth-grade class in for some discussion. But after talking about Pinocchio, the undergrads were shocked and embarrassed to find that the fourth-graders had understood the book better than they had. Why was that?

The answer, Guroian says, is that we have neglected the development of the moral imagination. The college students literally were less capable of understanding the moral themes in the story of Pinocchio than were the kids.

As Guroian writes in his book, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, the undergrads noticed that the fourth-graders were better at grasping "the nature and source of Pinocchio's temptations and backsliding, and they were less ready to excuse him for the behavior that got him into so much trouble and caused his father such grief."

His students even began to suspect that "maybe they had lost something in growing up—a sense of wonder that might have been better tended and retained" if they had been brought up reading books like Pinocchio.

"Perhaps," Guroian concludes, "the fourth graders that they had met were actually nearer than they were to the wellsprings of human morality and were better served by reading Pinocchio than they had been by taking a required college course in ethics."

Guroian's book is subtitled, *How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination*, and in it he explains that children are born with a strong moral sense. They always want to know if a character in a story is good or bad. "This need to make moral distinctions," he says, "is a gift, a grace, that human beings are given at the start of their lives." But it is a gift that needs to be cultivated or it will atrophy and disappear.

And that's exactly what's happening, as Guroian's experience with college students has proved. "Our society," Guroian warns, "is embracing an anti-human trinity of pragmatism, subjectivism, and cultural relativism that denies the existence of a moral sense or a moral law." And in this intellectual climate, the moral imagination is being starved.

One of the best remedies for this can be found in classic children's literature. Moral education is best accomplished through stories, through depictions of courage and the other virtues, showing what they look like in action. A classic story like Pinocchio or Peter Pan or the Velveteen Rabbit communicates vital truths about what it is to be human. It teaches us what bravery is, how to resist temptation, how to practice love and self-sacrifice. A dry course on ethics simply cannot begin to bring these themes to life in the same way.

Why not pick up a copy of Guroian's *Tending the Heart of Virtue*. Reacquaint yourself with classic children's literature and read it to your children or your grandchildren. Who knows? If you start early enough, by the time they're in college—even the most secular one imaginable—they just might graduate with as much moral discernment as they had when they were in the fourth grade.

## 2. Under the Sea & Beyond the Clouds

### "The Little Mermaid"

By: Chuck Colson|Published: June 2, 1999 9:42 AM

The success of the 1989 film, *The Little Mermaid*, is credited with single-handedly saving the Walt Disney company from ruin. Millions saw the movie, and tens of millions purchased the video. But few people know that the original Hans Christian Andersen fairytale is—unlike the Disney version—a profound Christian allegory of love, immortality, and the true meaning of life.

In the animated Disney version, the Little Mermaid is a careless, immature girl who becomes obsessed with winning the heart of a handsome human prince. But in Andersen's original, the Little Mermaid is a thoughtful and sensitive creature whose desire for the love of a human is only a part of a deeper longing for heaven.

In Andersen's story, mermaids don't have souls. Instead, they live 300 years and then vanish, becoming mere foam on the waves. But the Little Mermaid's grandmother tells her that if she wins the love of a human and marries him, she will receive a soul just like his, and be allowed to live forever in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Andersen's use of the term "Kingdom of Heaven" is just one of many Christian references in his story. In his book, *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, Vigen Guroian explains that the "rose-red willow" in the Little Mermaid's garden symbolizes "blood and tears and the passion of the Cross." The sun high above the surface of the water represents God. Guroian says that Andersen's description of the sun looking like "a purple flower with... light streaming out from its center," evokes an "otherness" and a "numinous reality" that points toward heaven. In fact, at the story's end, when the Little Mermaid at last begins her journey toward immortality, Andersen makes the connection explicit, saying "she lifted her bright arms up towards God's sun."

Disney's *Little Mermaid* is obsessed with romantic love. But in the Andersen version, winning the heart of the prince is just part of the mermaid's deeper longing for heaven. At one point she exclaims: "I would give the 300 years I have [in order to] be a human girl for just one day and then to receive my part in the Kingdom of Heaven."

Guroian says the Disney version "betrays the original and exploits our society's obsessions with physical beauty and romantic love," making the latter into an idol. Those who are familiar only with the film ought to read the original story, which, Guroian says, warns "about the harm that such an idol can bring upon its worshiper."

In the end, Andersen's *Little Mermaid* gets her wish for immortality through a Christlike act of self-sacrifice. Guroian says that "In this great and profound fairy tale, Andersen challenges every reader to contemplate his or her fate if love does not endure and personal immortality is just an illusion."

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If your own kids are familiar only with the watered-down Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*, read them Andersen's original. Explain its deeper meanings, and how it differs from the Disney version. The story of a mermaid who longs for heaven provides a role model that may get them thinking about the real kingdom of heaven—and how they must live to find it.

## 3. Getting Real

### "The Velveteen Rabbit"

By Chuck Colson | Published Date: June 03, 1999

Can a story about a toy rabbit help children learn more about heaven? According to Vigen Guroian, author of *Tending the Heart of Virtue*, it certainly can. The story I'm talking about is *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Margery Williams's classic tale of a threadbare toy bunny who becomes a real rabbit. It's a profound allegory on love and immortality, and reading it to our children just might awaken in them a deep desire for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Written a century ago, *The Velveteen Rabbit* is about a toy rabbit that longs to be real. It watches the wind-up toys in the nursery as they move and walk, and wonders if their sound and movement means they are real. But a toy horse explains the secret: "When a child loves you for a long, long time... then you become Real."

And that is exactly what happens to the velveteen rabbit: A little boy comes to love the rabbit more than any other toy, so that it actually becomes real to the boy. But at the end of the story, it undergoes another, even more magical transformation. A fairy appears and says, "You were real to the Boy because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to everyone." And the toy rabbit becomes a real flesh-and-blood rabbit.

The allegory, of course, is that real life is not merely physical life. Real life is something we receive when we accept God's love for us, when God puts His spirit in us. And that life never ends; when we die physically, we simply enter into God's life even more fully. We become even more "real."

As Guroian writes, the boy's love for the rabbit is "analogous to the love of God that gives each one of us being, and, according to biblical faith, draws us through our own response to his love into immortal life."

C. S. Lewis weaves similar themes into his Narnia tales; he shows that heaven is somehow more real than Earth. Near the end of his book, *The Last Battle*, Lewis has his characters leaving what he famously calls "the Shadowland" of the earthly England for the "real England," saying that the two are as different as a shadow is of a real object.

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Children love allegorical tales that help them think about the big questions of our ultimate destiny. Guroian writes that books like *The Velveteen Rabbit* "address the need that children have for satisfying answers to such questions as: 'What happens to us after we die?'" As Guroian puts it, we are all born with a moral imagination, which presses us to find answers to the meaning and significance of life. But, he warns, the moral imagination "needs to be cultivated, like the tea rose in a garden. Left unattended and unfed, the rose will languish and thistle will grow in its place." A wonderful way to tend your children's moral imagination, and to guide them toward answers to the questions their hearts long to know, is by reading them classic children's stories like *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

And the next time someone tells you to "get real," tell them what being real really means.

## 4. What Literature Teaches About Friendship

### "The Wind in the Willows"

By Chuck Colson | Published Date: December 31, 1998

Who is the Great American Hero? Well, the typical image of the hero is John Wayne or Clint Eastwood: the tough guy, the loner, riding into town to do battle with the bad guys—then riding into the sunset, as alone as ever. But a recent book by Vigen Guorian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue* suggests this may not be the best model for our kids to emulate.

Why not? Because the capacity to be a virtuous person is intimately bound up with knowing how to be a good friend.

One of the best ways we can teach our kids about the value of friendship is by turning off the movie channel and dusting off the best works of children's literature, like Kenneth Grahame's classic book *The Wind in the Willows*. It tells a charming story about a mole who leaves his underground home in the English countryside and makes friends with a water rat. Through his new friendship, Mole discovers a fascinating new world, populated by Badger and Otter and Toad and a host of other colorful animal characters.

*The Wind in the Willows* was one of C. S. Lewis's favorite children's books—and it's safe to say he knew something about the subject. The story shows "how friendships can form us into stronger and more integrated persons," Guroian writes. "Mole is called out of his womb-like home to become a friend to others," and his character develops precisely through learning to be a loyal and giving friend. To quote Guroian again, "Modern psychology confirms that common stock of human wisdom which says that children ought to have friends, and not just any friends, but [ones] with real virtues that in combination contribute to the moral growth of all the friends."

And when a child goes astray, it is often his friends who call him to accountability. In *The Wind in the Willows*, Toad suffers from uncontrollable appetites that threaten his own destruction. He is lucky to have friends who love him enough to act severely with his weaknesses. Led by the tough-minded but loving Badger, they confront Toad about his excesses, and fight off the vicious stoats and weasels who have taken advantage of him. What else are friends for?

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The view of friendship that Kenneth Grahame expresses in story form comes from ancient times. It was the Greek philosopher Aristotle who wrote that friendship "helps the young to keep from error; . . . [and] those in the prime of life it stimulates to noble actions... for with friends men are more able to think and to act." Even more important, friendship reminds us that in Christ, God himself has called us His friends. As Guroian writes, "friendships sound the call to a higher and transcendent communion with God.

Now, I enjoy a good Western as much as the next guy, and John Wayne and Clint Eastwood are among my favorites. But why not introduce your children to a different kind of hero, a hero who is not afraid to be a friend. One who will do battle, not as Clint Eastwood does with the outlaws and the crooks, but one like Badger, who helps his friend Toad conquer the demons within.

### 5. From the Mouths of Children

#### "Amelia's Notebook"

By Chuck Colson | Published Date: November 18, 1997

Check out the children's section of the bookstore, and you'll find a book that looks exactly like a nine-year-old's private diary.

It's filled with silly observations and crude, hand-drawn pictures, like a sketch of a girl sticking French fries up her nose.

Surprisingly, the book is not a child's diary. It's merely masquerading as one. The title is *Amelia's Notebook*, and it's so popular that it's spawned two sequels. But why are parents buying books that stoop to the level of a nine-year-old?

In *Amelia's Notebook*, we find Amelia making fun of her teacher's Brillo-pad hair, and complaining that her sister smells bad. Across another page, Amelia scrawls "Top Secret!" and "Keep Out!" Without a doubt the author has captured the self-obsessed, melodramatic voice of a pre-adolescent. Another book of the same genre is *The Great Puke-Off*, which tells the story of two kids who hope to induce another child to lose his lunch by putting a cockroach on his burrito.

It's enough to make any PARENT lose his lunch.

Is this the kind of literature we should be buying for our children? Of course, we want books that celebrate childhood. But this new crop celebrates childishness. They encourage kids to revel in the worst aspects of immaturity.

This new approach is a far cry from the role children's books have traditionally played. Once upon a time, stories were filled with what Harvard child psychiatrist Robert Coles calls "moral energy" - lessons that gently set kids on the path to adulthood. Think of *Pinocchio*, which warned kids against

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irresponsibility and lying. *The Ugly Duckling* encouraged children to look beyond the surface. How did we go from great stories like these to *Amelia's Notebook* and *The Great Puke-Off*?

The answer has to do with the modern notion that adults have nothing important to say to children. Like many modern ideas, this one was first popularized during the Enlightenment by the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was an atheist who taught that man is not born fallen and foolish, with a need to learn wisdom, as scripture teaches. Instead, he said, humans are born innocent and with innate wisdom.

Today's children's books reflect this idea. They suggest that adults should not attempt to impose their ideas of wisdom on kids—and that children are right to want to celebrate childish behavior. But the Bible doesn't romanticize children that way. Children, like the rest of us, are subject to sin and self-will. Hence, the book of Proverbs is full of warnings to children to heed the wisdom of their parents. And parents are admonished to teach their children at every opportunity.

This is not to deny that good children's literature look at life from a kid's eye view. But the stories are animated with "moral energy" as the characters face challenges and overcome their weaknesses. For example, *The Prince and the Pauper*, by Mark Twain, is told through the eyes of two boys. Through the events of the plot, each boy is prodded to grow up and learn more mature character. This is the kind of book we should be buying for our children. We ought to make sure the books they're reading will encourage them to gradually put away childish things... and grow toward Christ-like maturity.

## 6. Fairly Stupid Fairy Tales

### Have Stories Lost Their Innocence?

By Chuck Colson | Published Date: January 06, 1999

There's a new best-selling book out called *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. But this version is told from the wolf's point of view. According to the wolf, it was the pigs' own fault that he ate them up. Why? Because they should not have built their houses out of straw and twigs in the first place. The story ends with the wolf blaming the media and saying he was framed.

Now, this may sound funny—and on one level it is—but it's also part of a trend to take the innocence out of children's books and replace it with a hip, world-weary cynicism.

The author of *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, Jon Scieszka, has written another bestseller called *The Stinky Cheeseman and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*. This book's tone is even more cynical. In one story, the ugly duckling grows up to be, not a beautiful swan, but an even uglier duck. In another story, a frog isn't really a prince—he just tricks a princess into thinking he is. After she kisses him, the frog says "I was just kidding," and hops back into the pond, leaving the princess, the author

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writes, "to wipe the frog slime off her lips."

In each of these stories, the original moral is turned into a cynical joke. The redeeming aspects of these fairy tales are not only lost—they're openly mocked. A frog is just a frog, and an ugly duckling will never become something beautiful. The author's cleverness is the smirking, self-satisfied tone of the immature fifth-grader—as though Beavis and Butthead had replaced Beatrix Potter.

But kids don't need cleverness and cynicism. Traditional fairy tales are wonderful because they tap into our longing for the transcendent. Wicked villains are punished, nobility is rewarded, and there's almost always a happy ending.

The great Christian apologist and children's author C. S. Lewis wrote that fairy tales can create a longing for transcendence. In an essay called *On Three Ways of Writing for Children*, Lewis, argued that fairy stories have a great power for good. When we read fairy tales, Lewis wrote, we "long to go through the looking glass, to reach fairy land." This deep longing we feel, Lewis added, "stirs and troubles" the reader "with the dim sense of something beyond his reach."

In other words, fairy tales provide us with imaginary glimpses of heaven—and thus help prepare us for the real heaven. After all, heaven is the true fairyland that we all long for when we read about noble princes, brave knights, and fire-breathing dragons. It's where we go beyond the looking glass of our own fallen world.

So when you're picking out books for children, go right past those stories about cynical frogs and blame-shifting wolves. Instead, buy the *Chronicles of Narnia*, the Redwall tales, and other stories about princes and princesses, dragons and knights, and houses made of gingerbread.

Because Heaven will be more like these imaginary worlds than today's world-weary writers realize.

## 7. Cheerless Children's Books

### Literature as Therapy

By Chuck Colson|Published Date: November 24, 1997

There's a new batch of children's books out that just might give your children nightmares. No, I'm not talking about "Goosebumps" or other horror fiction. These new books, ironically, were actually written to help kids overcome their fears.

"Let's Talk About Staying in a Shelter," one title suggests. Other books invite kids to talk about what happens when their parents divorce, or die, or get thrown in jail. In a book called "Daisy," about domestic violence, a little girl talks about how her father punches and kicks her.

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These books are part of a trend among children's book authors to confront kids with the harsh realities of life. The idea is to use stories to help children deal with their own problems.

In fact, one of the most popular children's authors of all time, Maurice Sendak, says parents should not try to protect children from the dark side of life. The worst crime we can commit against children, Sendak argues, "is not teaching them to survive" in a world of AIDS and drive-by shootings. Sendak himself has come out with a book called "We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy," about homeless kids who live out of a cardboard box.

But do these books really do any good? In a book called "Books That Build Character," William Kilpatrick and his co-authors Gregory and Suzanne Wolfe say that the problem with issue-oriented books is that they offer children "no self-forgetfulness, no room to stand back and get a larger view." Instead, these books cater to anxiety and self-absorption. As a result, Kilpatrick writes, it's questionable whether they work even on a therapeutic level.

A better approach to helping kids explore life's difficulties, Kilpatrick maintains, is through the use of fantasy, because fantasy provides the necessary distance. Kilpatrick relates the true story of a ten-year-old boy who struggled with cancer. As the child's mother recalls, "At first he was very upbeat, but after several painful treatments, his optimism faded. We were afraid that he was ready to give up. We were really afraid for his life."

But then, his mother says, the boy "came upon the story of the labors of Hercules in a book of myths, and he read it and re-read it, and it seemed to give him back his spirit."

As Kirkpatrick explains, "the story of Hercules allowed the boy to transcend his fears and to cast his personal struggle on a mythic level. He was probably fortunate," Kilpatrick adds, "that some well-meaning adult didn't hand him a book about a boy with cancer. That sort of thing often serves only to increase the depression."

In the last few days we've talked about children's books that celebrate rebelliousness and childish behavior. We've learned about books that replace innocence with a world-weary cynicism. We've examined stories that subtly promote non-Christian philosophical views and horror stories that substitute shocks for a good plot and richly-drawn characters.

The fact that books like these are flooding bookstores means that today more than ever, Christian parents must keep a close eye on what their children read, and help them find books that will develop their moral imagination.

Books that will serve as literary springboards to a transformed life.