In Conclusion

It is amazing, in a three-day conference devoted to the subject of evaluating books for children and young adults, that not one speaker has given much attention to the question, "What is a good book?" It reminds me of the first day of a college English class where the professor, the late, lamented Beverle Houston, sat at the head of the seminar table, blew an impressive smoke ring into the air above us, and majestically announced that there was no such thing as a good book. We senior English majors, each passionately attached to various books, authors, or centuries, were aghast, dismayed at the thought that four years of fancy education had just gone down the drain.

What Beverle meant, of course, was that we can't call a book "good" in the same sense we can call it "red-covered," or 247 pages long, or fiction, or "by Jane Austen." These are all objective qualities (although the post-structuralist French would even question that), while an assessment of a book's value is a subjective response. Checklists of evaluative criteria may help us in defining our questions about a book, but our answers will always tell us more about ourselves than about the book in question. When Gertrude Stein was asked by The Little Review for her assessment of modern art, she replied, "I like to look at it," a response that is facile but entirely to the point.

The review editors who led off the conference discussed how to get books to the librarians who will want them; librarians Janice Harrington and Janie Schomberg talked about what they wanted from
reviews. Violet Harris, in her critique of the whole-language classroom, articulated yet another audience for reviews. Each of these speakers addressed the pragmatic matrix of children's book reviewing: how can the reviewing process most effectively get books to children? Betty Carter and Dorothy Briley looked more closely at what reviews do and do not do: Carter suggests an implicit bias in the review media against informational nonfiction; Briley measures the commercial impact of reviews, and also wishes the reviewers could come to some agreement as to what constitutes adequate documentation in informational books for children. Catherine Mercier and Barbara Kiefer brought the language of formal criticism into our debate, reminding us that the "practical criticism" of reviewing has a base in critical theory, however far removed words such as "charming" can be from considerations of "synchronic paradigmatic shifts." Graciela Italiano and Hazel Rochman brought reviewing into the arena of social criticism, translating headlines about multiculturalism and political correctness into questions with practical consequences for library materials selection.

Despite divergent approaches, the papers together demonstrate a healthy synthesis of thinking about children's literature that has long characterized the best library school teaching and research in the subject. Unlike English and even education departments that have recently "discovered" children's literature as a newly appropriate field for aesthetic gleaning, library education has been looking at children's books for nearly a century. And by necessity, that research has encompassed manifold approaches in which the practical, political, and aesthetic inform and enrich each other to the benefit of both children and books.

Good reviewers know that specifics in evaluation yield far more than sweeping adulation or offhand dismissal. The question, "Is it a good book?" seems at once too big to be useable, and too petty to be useful. Perhaps, though, a Platonic conception of a "good book" is itself a useful drive, pushing and provoking questions that force us to specify our own ideas of what a "good book" is.

What is a good book? Just because there's no answer doesn't mean it's not a good question.

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