

WHERE'S THE REALITY?

By

VERA AND BILL CLEAVER

The opinion has been ventured that perhaps good writers do not write children's books and the author of this goes on to offer his judgment as to why. He points to the lack of tradition in children's books upon which today's writers can draw and measure themselves against. He acknowledges the fact that some very good books for children have been written but suggests that there haven't been enough of these which offer style, sensibility and vision to constitute tradition. He declares that we ourselves, once upon a time, read all those books and that our reaction to them was only a quiet smile or a noisy laugh and that things have not changed. Writers, it appears, still continue to serve the publishing world large, painless doses of innocuous pap, stubbornly condescending to children.

I don't believe that any of this should offend those of us who write children's books. It should, I think, provoke us to grave, spotlight self-examination. It could be true.

Perhaps we *have* abdicated our responsibility to the little people. It is possible that our causes have become too personal. Maybe we have become too concerned with our own advancement — God knows we need to be concerned about our own advancement — for a writer of children's books desperately needs sanction and in the main he isn't getting it. Notwithstanding the fact that there aren't any handicaps or chances of environment that can hold the real writer down, still he has made a large investment in himself and, like other professionals, he should be able to expect a return. This doesn't always happen. Some very fine books for children have been written and ignored. Some very awful books for children have been written and acclaimed. Maybe this is the system. I don't know. But I do know that there are those of us who might possibly be forgetting our real beneficiaries — the children.

I am talking about reality in children's books. I don't believe we are offering enough reality. This is not to say that I think a child should have tragedy and suffering and violence and all the errors in this world and its people rammed down his throat every time he opens a book. It *is* to say that I think children are human and therefore capable of all the human responses. They are attuned to the earth and the flesh and they want to respond — they cannot *wait* to respond. They are alive and lusty. They have their own passions. They can be cruel, tender, sympathetic, indifferent. Sometimes they are lonely. They have their ambitions. They delight in humor. They revel in outrage and indignation. They don't like palliatives any more than adults like palliatives. And yet, in most of our books for them, we continue to dish up to them the same old placebos woven into and around the same old, simple-minded themes devoid of purpose and dimension, scarecrow of artistic integrity and inner resonance. The devotion to detail,

the big, universal values, the pride in the production simply isn't there in most of these books. I believe that they are too unconnected with life.

I don't see why this has to be. There *are* some children who live in a world without sweet, hard working parents who would rather be hung from a rafter than utter even a mild swear word. Some parents are mean and lazy. Some of them have been known to say damn and hell. The ears of children aren't painted on and neither are their eyes.

Kids are wise to adults whether we like the idea or not. We aren't hiding anything from them. They are excellent physiognomists, shrewd in their people calculations. They know when we're lying to them. They know that in this life there just isn't that much sentimentality, that many brave dogs waiting around to snatch them from the teeth of peril, that many adorable, talking animals, that much buried treasure. As an author of some moderate success people come to me with these cutely contrived, sometimes delightful, always patronizing little tales and ask for my opinion. I am always tempted to ask where is the reality? But seldom do. I am not an educator. No doubt preliterate children enjoy these foolish, unreal stories. Just what they would prepare a child for is beyond my focus however.

I believe that books for children should have a purpose, should provide the experience of reality, hopefully in good taste and with enough complexity in them to create the habit of critical reading. I think books for our little people should reveal ideas of lasting value, should concern themselves with the big, universal truths. It is true that in books like these there may not be immediate comprehensibility but the healthy, curious mind will return again and again to them until all of the questions have been satisfied.

I don't see how we can settle for anything less if ever we are to establish a tradition in children's books. The adults have their tradition. Why not children have theirs?

Editor's Note: The Cleavers are newcomers to the children's book field, having made a lasting impression with their first for children, *Ellen Grae*, published by Lippincott in 1967. It was selected as one of the best books of the year for children in 1967 by *Library Journal*, was more recently included in the Library of Congress list of best books of the year for children, and has received favorable editorial comment from the new editor of *Horn Book Magazine*. More recently it and its sequel, *Lady Ellen Grae*, were acclaimed in the December issue of *Atlantic*.)

What is new is new not because it has never been there before, but because it has changed in quality. — *Educators Guide to Media and Methods*, December, 1968.