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The Meaning of Story: Literature in the Formation of a Child

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Sarah Clarkson, *Caught Up in a Story: Fostering a Storyformed Life of Great Books and Imagination with Your Children* (Colorado: Whole Heart Press, 2003).

Stories are the lifeblood of existence. They are the heartbeat that pumps vision into a child's developing imagination and hope into his or her soul.

In her book, *Caught up in a Story*, Sarah Clarkson takes on the task of revealing the essential nature of good literature, of *story* itself for the formation and education of children. Drawing on her own childhood steeped in good literature, and her extensive study of literature in adulthood, she identifies the purpose of her book as two-fold: to uncover the role that good stories play in the formation and growth of the imagination, and to re-claim for us, especially parents, the importance of the imagination for all aspects of a fully human life.

The structure of the book follows the traditional "dramatic arc" structure found within many classic narratives, linking each point in the arc with a period of childhood: "Exposition" with early childhood, "Rising Action" with the elementary period, "Crisis" with adolescence, "Falling Action" with young adulthood, and "Dénouement" with the need for a "happy ending." Each chapter develops a different aspect of the reason why stories are so important at that particular stage of a young person's life, and ends with Clarkson's own suggestions of good books to be introduced during each stage.

In the first two chapters Clarkson lays the groundwork of her argument by exploring more fully our culture's denigration of imagination, even for children:

Parents today are often presented with a list of facts and skills they must pound into their children's heads. Childhood formation, according to many models, seems to be about the filling of a mental bucket rather than the forming of a whole, vibrant soul ready to act justly, love beauty, and bring goodness to the world.(7)

In contrast to such a view, which only gives value to what is "useful," stories reinforce for children the deeper realities that make life worth living; they build up and form the imagination. Today, Clarkson argues, *imagination* is too often relegated to a naïve childishness, a certain escapism... something opposed, at least on some level, to the common-sense, pragmatic world of adulthood. Rather, the understanding of imagination that Clarkson employs harkens back to the original, traditional sense of the term: that faculty of our intellect that allows us to form images of real things within our mind: to represent, and hold onto a picture of the things we encounter in the world, even when not directly

beholding them with our eyes. In this sense, imagination is a faculty that we cannot do without, at any age; it, in fact, is an essential component to our engaging with and comprehending reality at all.

In our pragmatic age, when we are consumed with practicalities and causes and results,

it is easy to lose sight of the storied nature of existence. Conditioned as we are by a technological society in which productivity is success, our view of life often takes the shape of the goals we must accomplish, the money we must make, even the spiritual growth we must attain. This pragmatism extends to our view of childhood formation as well, as we hurry to teach children the right facts and habits so that they can take the right tests and accomplish the right things. But in our pressured drive to do many things, we forget what we were created to be: heroes and heroines in the great true tale of God. (15)

Clarkson argues that forming children in stories that give vivid introductions to what is good, true, and beautiful from the earliest years gives them the necessary ethos in which to experience the depth and wonder of the world, and the story to which they belong.

Literature expands the child's world through imagery; it introduces them to an array of settings, contexts and characters that incarnate and give form to such concepts as courage, goodness, and love. It also provides children with a rich and varied vocabulary by which to understand the world on a deeper level. Being introduced to different stories inspires children to take on, to "try out" the different roles and personas they encounter: they experiment living and walking in others' shoes. These experiences form the adult's ability to relate to others, to have the capacity to insert themselves within the stories and experiences of others.

The next chapters focus on the "Crisis" moment of a story—which, as we recall, the author has linked to the period of adolescence—and the "Falling Action" of young adulthood. Clarkson argues that without a richly developed imagination, not only is a child's understanding of, and relation to, the world diminished, but also his sense of self. Without this sense of self, children lack the ability to enter into, and fully *participate in* the unfolding of their own "stories." The result is a listless, apathetic and easily swayed generation of young people who follow blindly whatever cultural opinion wins out at the time, because they lack the tools to really *adhere* to things from the depths of a richly formed interior life. The contemporary drive of childhood formation tends to focus exclusively on external activities, to the detriment of forming a child's interior life, resulting in children who know *what* to do, but not *why*: who have no habits of reflection and interior contemplation in which to know themselves and the world on a rich, deep level.

Here, Clarkson also identifies the danger of technology that plays into this problem. Technology, she maintains,

is not a neutral force in the life of a child. When children learn early in their lives to depend on technology for entertainment and information, they lose the habit of imagination. Trained from an early age to turn to any available screen for entertainment, learning, or even comfort, they become unused to imagining something for themselves. ... when children addicted to technology become adults, they will lack the creative faculty required to bring something new into existence... such children will lack a richly developed world within themselves, allowing them both to intuit spiritual realities beyond their sight, but also to perceive meaning within the beauty of the world.(23)

In contrast, stories are what give the young person, especially in moments of crisis, the *substance* of heroism, the real sense that one's choices matter on a deep level, and that we have the *capacity* to

choose, to risk all of ourselves.

Without a richly developed sense of self, one's concept of heroism is also diminished. Children, Clarkson says, are growing up in a world that no longer believes heroism is realistic; indeed, a world which is so relativistic as to deny there is anything black and white to stand up for or against in the first place. It is the reality that our lives really do belong to a drama larger, deeper, and more significant than our lives alone that can restore to us this sense of heroism. "Heroism begins," Clarkson says, "when we realize that we are called to join a story much larger than ourselves" (65).

In her last chapter, Clarkson focuses on *hope*: on the ability of stories to lead us into a "happy ending". It is hope, Clarkson argues, which gives us the context in which to understand that the darkest periods, the hardest nights, the worst imaginable circumstances, as well as the drudgery of everyday banality are still not *all* of the story. When we are brought up steeped in stories in which other people walked through the darkest, hardest moments, and were brought to a happy ending, our minds and hearts and spirits learn to rely on the broader, deeper truth that the *immediate* problems, or the *immediate* disasters do not define, or sum up, the whole of our persons. Here, Clarkson speaks to the necessary *companionship* that the characters of good stories can offer to those living through the tumultuous periods of adolescence and young adulthood. As human beings, we need companions on the way, companions who can encourage us. And while she acknowledges that stories can never replace true, real companionship, Clarkson would still have us recognize the significance of having people such as Wendell Berry's Hannah Coulter or Charles Dickens' Amy Dorritt as concrete examples to turn to along the way.

While she does not address this directly, what struck me in reading this book was the problem that stretches much deeper than our overuse of technology, or materialism, or loss of imagination. The deeper void that Clarkson is seeking to address is the fact that we live in a *narrative-less* society. Our modern culture is in many ways a "non-cultural culture," as Romano Guardini put it: we do not share a common way of life, formed and founded on a rich, full, history and tradition, passed on from one generation to another. In a certain sense, the reason that good literature is more crucial for today's child than ever before is because the modern child does not come into the world aware of belonging to a family, much less a narrative, a history, a people, a reality that is beyond him or her. Every other period of history has given to its young people a fully developed way of life. They grew up formed by the oral stories and traditions of their ancestors, of the people that had literally broken the ground on which they lived, had built the homes in which they dwelled, and had founded the world they inherited. They were surrounded by a very living and real companionship, a history to which they belonged, and from which they received themselves. This reality is foreign to us today. And in the face of such a reality, it is a gift to discover an artist such as Clarkson, who can remind us first of our need for this, and recall us to one of the ways we can still access this *storyformed* life: through the stories written for us from a world that still understood itself as an unfolding story belonging to something greater. In a world in which it is increasingly hard to look to those around us for real heroes, for examples of what real living looks like, good stories can be an access point, a reminder to us, and can give us the foundation to continue to build and live a true life.

Clarkson's book is deep, and thought provoking. And it is a joy to read. Her argument about the value of good stories, about the importance of using language to articulate a rich picture of the world is reinforced in her own beautiful use of words, and her ability to do for us within her book exactly what she is arguing for: steeping the reader in the images and characters of so many stories within a book advocating for their necessity. I would highly recommend this book to parents, to educators, and to anyone feeling lost in an increasingly fast-paced, isolated, technological world, where our souls are

parched for the rich, deep, satisfying, experience of being restored to the larger story of which all of our lives are an invaluable part.

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