

READING WITH MOTHER

BOOKS BEFORE FIVE. by Dorothy White.
New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 12/6.

(Reviewed by N.M.)

BOOKS Before Five are books that Mother reads. They are, to be sure, not always read in the most favourable circumstances: *Mother Goose* may be pushed urgently between the iron and the ironing-board, or *The Gingerbread Man* perched on the kitchen bench between the cook-book and the mixing-bowl. They are books for all hours—books before five quite often means (at least in summer time) books before 5.0 a.m. Yet whether Mother reads them with one eye on the dinner, or with both eyes half-closed, they are the infant's first introduction to a world of wonder and delight, and as necessary to his healthy development as vegetables and vitamins.

But it is a lot easier for mothers to learn about vegetables and vitamins than about children's books, and it is commoner to find a facile agreement about what children should be prevented from reading than sound advice on how to develop and encourage reading of the right kind.



DOROTHY WHITE

Reassurance and encouragement for mothers

For eight years Dorothy White has been one of the few accessible guides in this field, and easily the best of them. In 1946 she wrote *About Books for Children*, a survey of children's literature which provided not only a whole library of titles for harassed parents to draw on, but sound standards on which they might judge the quality of whatever children's books came their way.

Books Before Five might be assumed, from its title, to be a full-length treatment of the Picture Book chapter in the earlier work. In one sense it is, but the angle of approach is so different that it is vastly more engrossing than a mere re-working of such material could be. Mrs. White's first book was the fruit of her training as a librarian, and in particular of a notable term as children's librarian in Dunedin. It was the book of an expert, and though it embodied much shrewd observation of children, it was detached and objective. *Books Before Five* comes from a new environment. Though the trained and articulate observer is still readily discernible, Mrs. White appears here as a mother making her own report on experience:

Shortly after my daughter's second birthday, I began to make some rough notes about the books that I read to her, notes which grew gradually into this reading diary, a mixture of her views and mine about the picture books we shared.

The words "we shared" are worth emphasising. Inevitably there is more in this diary than a record of books read. Mr. H. C. D. Somerset (in a scholarly foreword which is at the same time an expert appraisal of the book) points out that "a child is growing up in its pages and the varied pattern of her

social, emotional and intellectual development gradually unfolds as the weeks and months pass." Since he is writing as a teacher, and in part for teachers, Mr. Somerset's attention is concentrated on the child. I don't think many mothers will probe as deeply as he does—or even as deeply as he would like them to do—but most of them will recognise that *Books Before Five* is important as the study, not of a child alone, but of a mother and child.

The book is good in a number of ways. I found it delightful simply to read, while Mrs. White's comments make it at the same time stimulating and profitable. Reading mothers, particularly those who use their libraries, will enjoy it because it maps familiar ground, and find reassurance and encouragement in it from the emphasis it places upon an activity whose importance they may have recognised but not fully understood.

Books Before Five is, in a restricted sense at least, the complement of *About Books for Children*. I don't suggest that it cannot stand on its own, but mothers who have read and used the earlier book will gain most pleasure and profit from its successor.

JOURNALISM AND POLITICS

LIFE SO FAR. by Wilson Harris; Jonathan Cape, English price 21/-.

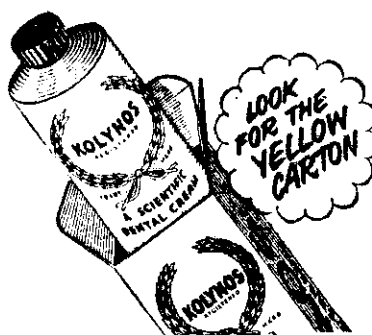
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