Books are Magic and Passports to Adventure. No Travel Required: An Interview with Wendy Mason-Geoghegan

Wendy Mason-Geoghegan and Raymond T. Chodzinski

I first met Wendy when I was visiting a local bookstore. Bill Moore and David Booth, both featured in an earlier issue of Teaching and Learning suggested that if I wanted to know anything about children's books Wendy Mason-Geoghegan would be the one to interview. It turns out they were absolutely right. She is as in love with books as anyone I know and she transmits her love and enthusiasm for her "friends" as she calls them to all. Since children's literature and reading with and to children surfaces in almost every article or commentary about how to increase literacy with youngsters, I decided to interview Wendy about the topic.

Chodzinski:
Throughout your career you have influenced many teachers, parents and students about reading and what learning to read means to a child. What have you come to understand literacy to mean?

Geoghegan:
To me, literacy means to have a love of words and to be able to make meaning out of words and to celebrate the use of words in writing and speaking. Individuals who encourage and teach reading should understand that literacy is nurtured through experience with books and the world of words. One should also understand that literacy with respect to reading does not just involve sight it involves touch and smell, in fact all the senses. Comprehension is an essential skill and tied to literacy in so many ways. It is important to understand that while a child may be able to recognize words on a page and pronounce them correctly, the words, only become real once the child experiences them as part of his or her cognition. That is to say I believe that children may read but they do not necessarily understand. Literacy is about understanding, comprehending and making sense of the world by relating to experiences not only of themselves but of others within different contexts. The cultural mosaic of Canadian life provides a wonderful perspective on which authors of children's books can and do help children become literate.

Chodzinski:
What advice do you give to parents and teachers who are interested in encouraging literacy through reading and books?

Geoghegan:
I can sum it up in few words. Read to children. It is so important for a child to witness an adult treasuring a book. Reading aloud to a child or group of children encourages the human side of discovering a story. Often, children and adolescents come to me and ask me to recommend a book for them to read. Many share that teachers and parents never read to them. This is unfortunate. Teachers and parents should make time to share the magic of books with children and take time to establish a routine of reading, listening, attending and discussing. Children need to be able to ask questions, explore alternatives, revise ending and play with a story. But most of all children want to hear a story read to them. I view reading to a child as part of the bonding book or its subject he would read to me and take the time to explain and discuss what he was reading. Much of the time I did not understand the information he shared. But, I recall fondly, being there and watching him treasure the book and its contents. My mother was my real friend. She loved books and I remember well that when I came home from school there was always a book on my bed. She sang songs and told stories that were gifted to her from her mother. I can remember too that when I returned home from holiday camp my mother gifted me with a special book that I had at some time previous, expressed interest. Other times she would select a book for me that I probably would never have picked myself but she enticed me with her selections.

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process. How can we expect children to appreciate reading if they are not involved in the process and more important witness an adult modeling the experience. For me, the vision of a child curled up in adult arms enthralled by the moment of the read and the experience is mind boggling. So too is a similar high when I see a classroom of children spellbound as a teacher reads the next few pages of a book that has captured their imagination and curiosity. A good book is the best discipline companion a teacher can have in the classroom.

Chodzinski:
You obviously have the opportunity to recommend books to a variety of age groups. What are some of your favourite books that you would recommend to our readers?

Geoghegan:
Since I have been appointed as a judge to the Canadian Children's Literature Award program Championing Canadian Books for Children and Youth it would not be prudent for me to share titles that might be presented for adjudication. So let me concentrate on books other than Canadian that I continually recommend to parents and teachers.

I highly recommend
- The 100 Dresses by Elenor Estes, published by Scholastic, ISBN 043919964 is an all time favourite of mine and is applicable to so many contexts. I also like
- My Very First Mother Goose by Opei and Wells, Candlewick, ISBN 1554026205 and of course
- Not to be missed is
  - Ira Sleeps Over by Bernard Weber and ISBN 0395265034
  - Would You Rather by John Birmingham. ISBN 1587172178

For young children I recommend to parents and teachers all kinds of predicting books and highly illustrated books that so perfectly explain the meaning of the written word to young children. For adolescents I urge parents and teachers to avoid trilogies and sequels. I realize full well that J. K. Rowling has brought many youngsters back to reading but I believe young readers want a novel that contextually relates to them and their experiences. Many of my young clients tell me that they have grown tired of the ‘trilogy’ and those they like are stories that stand on their own. I must say that one of my greatest hopes is that novels that contextually relate to life is when a parent, a grandparent and especially a teacher comes back to me and says the book I recommended was a match and that the child loved it. It is a gift to me and one that I treasure!

Chodzinski:
Tell me more about the Canadian Children's award program.

Geoghegan:
This program is sponsored by the Toronto-Dominion Bank. Its purpose is to recognize excellence in Canadian literature by awarding an annual award of one prize in English and French to the author and or illustrator of a book which has made the most distinguished contribution to Canadian Children's literature during the preceding year. The prize is valued at $20,000.00 dollars to the first prize recipient, $10,000.00 shared among runners up and a $2,500.00 prize to the publisher of the winning book. Eligible books consist of books targeted at an audience from infancy through to early adolescence. The awards are selected by a panel of five judges across Canada. I am honoured to have been selected as one of those judges.

Chodzinski:
What would you like to share with our readers about your goals for encouraging children to read?

Geoghegan:
Well, for one thing, if I won a lottery my dream would be to build a school that at its centre its heart would be a library brimming with books. It would be a library with books that children can touch and smell and read and love. There would be no technology that is best left for another learning environment. My library would be the center of a child’s educational universe. A universe where books are treasured and one in which everyone dedicated to working with children would openly appreciate and celebrate the joy of reading, telling and hearing good stories of every type imaginable.

But that probably will never happen so what can I share with others? My wish is that every parent takes the time to treasure the moments that they have together with their child and read, read, and read together. We are painfully aware of the debilitating effects of an adult who is unable to read. Do not deprive your child of the right to embrace stories and words and books. Help them to become literate by encouraging reading by reading to them. That goes for teachers as well. It is one
thing to teach reading, it is another to teach and model the joy of reading. It is important to know and communicate to children that when they have a book in hand they do not need a passport to travel anywhere they wish to go. I often refer to text written by P.B. Shelly

Know you what it is to be a child?...
It is to believe in love
To believe in loveliness
To believe in belief
It is to turn pumpkins into coaches
And mice into everything.

My message is to teach children to treasure the treasure and embrace books as long lasting friends.

Wendy Mason-Geoghegan is a retired educator who taught primary and elementary grades and undergraduate reading and literature at the University of Windsor. She also lectured in the pre-service teacher education program at University of Toronto. Wendy continues to serve on various committees and writes reviews for *CCBC Quarterly Journal* about Canadian children's books. She participated in a China-Canada exchange where she redesigned curriculum for elementary school children. Currently she is a book advocate with a large bookseller chain and has recently been appointed as one of only five judges across Canada to adjudicate a prestigious, annual Canadian Children's Book Award. In addition, Ms. Geoghegan is a representative to an advisory board of Canadian booksellers.

What teachers can do outside the school program to increase student recreational reading

- Collect discarded books and donate them to hospitals, day care centers, third world countries and to children who are known not to have access to books.
- Establish reading targets.
- Create partnerships between your class and a publisher, the library, another class.
- Nominate readers to read to children in lower grades.
- Establish a book club for books that are "not" required reading.
- Invite authors and storytellers to after hour programs.
- Encourage parents to become involved in reading at home.
- Give books as awards.
- Sponsor or support a summer reading camp.
- Read children's books so that you can recommend titles to young readers.
- Hold contests.
- Encourage read at home initiatives.
- Initiate a share a book program.
- Schedule daily reading times.
- Read to the class on a daily basis.