

Five Books for Your Children

Eileen Lantry. *Miss Marian's Gold*. 80pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Ass., 1981. \$5.95 (paper).

Kimber/J. Lantry. *Uncle Uriah and Tad*. 80pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Ass., 1981. \$5.95 (paper).

Patricia Maxwell. *A Soldier for Jesus: The First Adventist Missionary*. 77pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Ass., 1981. \$5.95 (paper).

Connie Wells Nowlan. *The Man Who Wouldn't Listen*. 96pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Ass., 1982. \$4.95 (paper).

Barbara Westphal. *Gaucholand Boy: The Frank Westphals in South America*. 94pp. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Ass., 1982. \$4.95 (paper).

reviewed by Peggy Corbett

The story is told of first graders who were diligently learning to read—or so the teacher thought. The children were reading round-robin style and the next passage to be read was: “No, Nip, No! No, no, Nip!” Little Jane’s turn came; she took a long pause, and then in response to the teacher’s prodding, heaved a sigh and blurted out, “four no’s and two Nip’s!” The message blares from the anecdote: give the children some content.

Many children of an earlier age learned to read from the great poetry, drama, and wisdom of the Bible, and creatively used (not the read-through-in-a-year stuff), the Bible and other great literature can still provide material that stimulates interest and provokes thought. But with such time-honored standards, modern authors of serious children’s literature face a great challenge that they too often sidestep by emphasizing the medium instead of the message. I do not dispute the “modern”

advantages of using the controlled vocabulary and syntax that often characterize the children’s literature of today, but the themes and purpose of much of what young readers get today do little for developing their minds and much for creating bored, restless daydreamers and non-readers. Children invariably respond, however, with renewed efforts when provided good literature.

Surely, Christian authors of children’s books should have the development of a child’s mind uppermost in their thoughts, and so I eagerly examine new publications for children that the Seventh-day Adventist publishing houses bring forth. My eagerness was quickly tempered long ago as year after year the houses released material that followed repetitive patterns of “safe” adventure and didactic moral tales, most assuring us of their factual basis. But some books have appeared that strike a balance between high adventure and thought-provoking purpose, and several such gems appear in the new series by Pacific Press, which features Seventh-day Adventist Church pioneers—the trailblazers. These books, written for readers at the “beginning levels,” use accessible concepts and vocabulary, but often they lack serious content. The need to use “beginning-level information” need not imply the transmission of “beginning-level content.” Even the most controlled vocabulary still allows for provocative content; anyone examining which books in an elementary library have the most-worn covers quickly learns that escapism does not always win out.

A volume in this series that leads the reader through a mere cataloguing of events with a “he said thoughtfully” and a “Mother asked” thrown in, is *Gaucholand*

Boy by Barbara Westphal. No theme appears in the book unless we could count: be good and brave because we are the first Seventh-day Adventists in South America. The story centers around a young son, Carl, through whom we do learn a few interesting cultural facts about South America (spoken of as one country). Yet Westphal only lightly touches a subject I find recurrent in nearly all the books in the series involving families: the absent father. Our Gaucholand Boy is blithely told that he should consider his father's absence an honorable sacrifice—his father is helping people—but the fact that Carl is a person seems lost.

The message coming through Connie Wells Nowlan's book carries a different impact. Michael B. Czechowski, *The Man Who Wouldn't Listen*, goes against church counsel and takes the gospel and his family to Europe, becoming the unofficial first Seventh-day Adventist missionary to Europe. His devotion to spreading the gospel leads him to neglect his family and absent himself from them often, a trial ostensibly brought upon his family as a result of his not listening to "counsel." Seen through the eyes of daughter Anna, her father appears undependable and uncaring. Though her love for him remains, Father sometimes seems a "stranger", and she asks herself, "Was God away when He was needed also?" Ms. Nowlan's title belies the real theme she has developed in her book, a message more appropriate to aspiring ministerial students than to fifth graders: how does family responsibility fare alongside church mission?

In an episodic account of the first official Seventh-day Adventist missionary's adventures, similar divisions of loyalty appear for John N. Andrews in Patricia Maxwell's *A Soldier for Jesus*. Andrew's son openly wonders how his father can be of more use to God without him, and years later when daughter Mary contracts tuberculosis in Switzerland, Andrews decides to include her in a trip home to the United States for General Conference session, *after* which she

is taken to a physician for examination. Although Maxwell, Nowlan, and Westphal must be given credit for not glossing over these realities of a minister's family life, I wonder what impression is left on the child who sees these men as role models?

Two of these little "trailblazer" volumes stand out from the others as valuable reading for any youngster. *Uncle Uriah and Tad*, by Kimber J. Lantry, mixes well the elements of adventure and moral purpose. The story follows the classic coming-of-age theme; Tad finds through some lonely struggles that people and situations are not always what they appear or claim to be. Through the dilemmas of an adolescent—applying for a first job, being bullied, doubting a choice one has made, and discovering that the adult world comes tarnished with hate and dishonesty—Lantry follows Tad's ambition to be part of "God's printing" at the Review. Mr. Stykes, the sneering, dishonest foreman of the pressroom, serves as foil for Uncle Uriah (Smith), who non-intrusively plays the part of a steady, positive influence on the boy. The story concludes with Tad's bare escape from the "big fire," which burns the Review to the ground. Though humans often fail in telling others of Heaven's love, God refuses to discard the medium—an encouraging message for an adolescent often filled with self-doubt.

Another title worthy of a child's library, *Miss Marian's Gold* by Eileen E. Lantry, succeeds as well in combining valuable theme with interest. The story of Marian Davis, long-time secretary to Ellen White, is little known and emerges as the struggle of a woman who sees her talent eclipsed by all those around her. Throughout the book, Miss Davis seeks to find the work that will best serve her God and also her inner need for satisfaction—her personal "gold." But the answer from God is continually, "wait;" and the "important work" finally emerges as that which does much good for others, yet brings little personal recognition or honor. The lessons of patience and self-sacrifice come through clearly, yet with

no overt sentimentalism. We also see these "trailblazers" (including the Whites) as human beings who lived lives apart from the pulpit. Current controversy concerning "Spirit of Prophecy" sources aside, *Miss Marian's Gold* presents the life of a woman who sought the true gold and found it to be not something obtained by effort, but a gift from God. Ms. Lantry has admirably combined the interest of early American travel and life with the age-old theme of the quest, while avoiding a didactic tone. One can only hope that the Pacific Press will hold out more often until manuscripts of this quality come their way. Or better yet, Adventist publishers should seriously solicit contracts with authors of proven worth and determine to publish only high-quality manuscripts.

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Rewriting Ellen White?

Ellen G. White. *Steps to Jesus*. 125 pp. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1981. \$5.95.

reviewed by Howard Gustrowsky

Steps to Jesus, first printed in 1981 and also available since 1982 under the title *Knowing Him Better*, is an adaptation of Ellen G. White's *Steps to Christ*, a book that the White Estate calls the "most popular" of her more than 70 published volumes. Translated into some 100 languages and read by "millions," *Steps to Christ* has proven its accessibility as a Christian missionary tool and devotional guide. The new version's purpose, according to its nameless authors, is to reach a "wider audience, particularly the youth," by converting "hard to understand phrases [into] every day language," simplifying the vocabulary, and abbrevia-

ting long sentences (*SJ*, p. 7). One still wonders: why tamper with a good thing? do the gains outweigh the losses—especially the potential losses to the foundation of Ellen White's prophetic role?

The White Estate's adaptation of *Steps of Christ* leads to question: what contribution does style make toward the acceptance of Ellen White's prose as religiously authoritative? No matter what the sources for her writings may have been, or how her books may have found their published form, they have inspired religious enthusiasm in many thousands of readers: before, during, and after the exposure of their ambiguous origins. As with the Bible and other inspirational and holy books, some of the most influential literature gains its popularity less because of what is said and more because of how it is said. A study of the relationship between literary style and prophetic authority would be a new approach to understanding Ellen White's writings.

Most readers will not analyze the text to discover the reasons behind the feeling they get from reading the new version, but they *will* feel a difference, and for devotional literature, what could be more important? The language of devotion, of religious inspiration, is a language of metaphor, sound, and rhythm. Devotional literature is primarily expressive in nature; it is willing to sacrifice propositional clarity to emotional appeal. If one uses this distinction as a criterion for judging the new version's accomplishments, the results are at best ambivalent, and at most, a clear corruption of the original.

Although an investigation into the new version's doctrinal purity is not the purpose of this article, I do challenge the White Estate's contention that "the author's thoughts have been retained" in the new book. The uneasiness that some readers will feel, and that students of literature will verbalize, can be charged to a change in literary style. Despite the disclaimers issued by the new authors, the total impact of a new vocabulary within the modified grammatical context is striking. One of the more