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# Eucatastrophic Tales: Tell the Story of God through Children's Literature

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

EUCATASTROPHIC TALES:

TELLING THE STORY OF GOD THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

MATTHEW BECK

PROJECT FACULTY:

AARON FRIESEN

PORTLAND, OREGON

APRIL 2022



## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

Matthew Beck

has been approved by  
the Evaluation Committee on March 10, 2022  
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

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## DEDICATION

To Avery, Asher, Ezra, and Eliza. As you often say to me, “Keep reading!”

.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my peer group, Min Choi, Mark Good, and Martina Hagler. I feel there must have been some kind of mix up that placed me in such distinguished company. Thank you to the entire cohort, John Karle, Henry Graf, Abby Lynn Haskell, Jimi DeLap, Mark Youngman, Seth D. Jones, Craig Hadley, Crystal Guderian, Bridget Thornton, Lori Whittemore, and Jamilah Merrick, including those who started with us but were called elsewhere, Andy Stinson and Barbara Russo. Let's not let the story end.

I am indebted to my project faculty professor, Aaron Friesen, whose enthusiasm for this idea was contagious enough to get me through the moments when obstacles seemed impassable. I am grateful for Clifford Berger, Loren Kerns, and Heather Rainey. They had my trust from the start and through to the finish. Thank you to the inimitable Len Sweet, whose one oddity too many is what drew us all in and gave us new eyes.

This journey started because of a cup of coffee and a nudge from Julia Hurlow. Something Dave Smith said helped me find the *why*. And so much came of that first conversation with John McCracken.

My parents, Bruce and Sandy Beck, contributed to this project long before it began, in the reading aloud of stories to me as a kid.

Lastly, thank you to my wife, Jami, and four children, Avery, Asher, Ezra, and Eliza. If there's anything good here, it's because your love for me spilled over onto the pages.

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## GLOSSARY

**Eucatastrophic Tale.** According to J.R.R. Tolkien, a story that is a “good catastrophe,” containing a “sudden joyous turn.”

**Teachers of Children.** Any adult in the role of influencing children, including but not limited to, school teachers, parents, mentors, librarians, authors, and children’s ministry pastors and volunteers.

**The Story of God.** Refers to the overarching narrative of the Bible.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This Project utilized a blended methodology that draws upon bibliographic resources, data derived from stakeholder collaboration, and human-centered design and iteration processes to create a heuristic-based, application-oriented Project.

## ABSTRACT

In this Project Portfolio, I will address the following NPO: Teachers of children have underappreciated or not recognized the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature. The overall key finding of my research is that children's literature is an ideal medium through which adults can facilitate conversations about God with children. This finding emerged from the ministry setting of the local church, and as an extension, the Christian university. My project is a thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature, and a more accessible companion resource: a universal bookmark guide. The book contains 5 chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The bookmark is standard size, front and back with a side that appeals to children and a side that helps adults facilitate God-conversations with any children's book.

## INTRODUCTION

My project began with a hunch that kids' books could be used in the discipleship of children. My direction at first was not clear. I just knew I wanted to research and write about the signs and symbols of my favorite middle grade fiction. Additionally, I had this quote from C.S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* about a boy who didn't recognize a dragon because he had read none of the right books. All in all, it started with an idea of an idea. A question really: "Could children's literature could uniquely tell the Story of God?"

During the orientation week at Portland Seminary, after being introduced to the concept of a basic Need/Problem/Opportunity (NPO), I initially thought about the intersection of children's literature and faith formation as an opportunity. I had the sense that not enough people were talking about this and that I could contribute fresh research. However, something happened that very same week that would help me reframe my project as a need.

During the first course advance, I reconnected with a friend in Portland who had planted a house church. After attending a home gathering during the week of our advance and talking with a few parents of young children there, I suddenly realized that I was listening to need. There is an entire generation of young parents who don't find the old ways of talking about God with their children useful anymore. For those who are anywhere on the deconstruction or reconstruction journey, the Sunday school answers don't suffice, especially for their kids, who they don't want to experience the same pain of unlearning they've gone through. "How do I talk about God with kids when I'm not sure what I believe about God anymore?" is the pain point I kept hearing. Children's literature, I hoped, could be utilized for a new kind of catechism.

During the discovery phase, I thought of my ministry context primarily as the local church. I sought out stakeholders who I knew, or suspected, that believed that children's



literature held faith formation possibilities. Included in this group was a professor of Children's Literature, a theology professor I once heard lecture on children's literature, some parents I knew who loved to read kids' books to their children, a public school teacher, and some children's ministry pastors and volunteers.

During my Discovery Workshop, my hypothesis felt confirmed on many levels. Each participant could articulate how children's literature was important to their own spirituality. The ideas that children's literature is underappreciated in the church, that fiction grows empathy, and that books can enliven a stale faith, also emerged as themes. I felt I was on the right track. However, this is where I diverged from the stakeholders. Whether it was a consensus, or simply the pressure of the most vocal participants, my stakeholders originally imagined my project as a resource for pastors and church leaders for their *own* spiritual development, not children. For the time being at least, I decided to stay the course and set my eyes on a project that would ultimately impact children, even as a resource for teachers of children.

Following the Discovery Workshop, one conversation in particular further clarified my trajectory. In a one-on-one interview with a professor of Children's Literature, I was introduced to the work of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop. Her article, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" would become a foundational document for my research. Additionally, this professor helped me imagine a resource that could be used in classrooms of Christian Universities, not just churches or homes. It was also this key stakeholder that would consistently remind me that any book could be utilized by adults to lead conversations about God with children. The formative power of children's literature was not simply in the right kinds of books, I was learning, it was in the right kinds of conversations.

During the design phase, I brought together a team of stakeholders who were adept in design thinking, who had an artistic craft of their own, or who simply loved to dream up big ideas. This included a graphic artist, a director of worship arts, the founder of a nonprofit indoor play space, and a community developer. Three big ideas emerged from the Design Workshop: a thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature with a companion bookmark resource that when paired with kids' book could help adults facilitate conversations about God with children, a children's ministry curriculum that feature children's literature as a key component, and an immersive play experience that brings books to life.

At this point in the process, I was really set on designing and writing a book. What the workshop helped me realize, however, was that a companion resource like the bookmark could make my research and ideas more accessible to adults who might never take the time to read the book, or could even introduce the book to more people who had found success in using the bookmark. Additionally, it confirmed that a book was needed, that it had the potential to inspire others who would create further projects like the immersive book experience.

The napkin sketches from my Design Workshop led to prototyping two sample chapters, a table of contents for the book, and the companion bookmark resource. The first couple prototypes of the bookmark were three-dimensional, with interactive flaps for young children. However, that aspect was abandoned at the time for ease of production. The second prototype was a children's ministry curriculum designed to use children's picture books to facilitate conversations about God. Both prototypes were received with enthusiasm, but in the end, I decided that the Most Viable Prototype (MVP) was the book and bookmark, in part because I began to believe deeply in sharing the research. I sensed that if I could get a book into people's hands, it would spark other project ideas that I couldn't think up on my own.

Early in the delivery phase, I set my sights on getting the book published, and my benchmarks were originally constructed around this goal. Opting instead to write a full draft of the book and two versions of the bookmark, I bumped the publication process to my launch plan. I then adjusted my benchmarks to reflect more realistic indicators of success. I gathered feedback during this phase by sharing additional chapters with key stakeholders and using the bookmark in a book club setting. This is when I made a key discovery: prompting children before and during the story, not just after, was essential to making the reading meaningful. Additionally, I collaborated with a graphic artist, sharing various sketches with children and adults alike until we satisfactorily met our goal of balancing a design that was aesthetically appealing to children and functionally useful to adults.

In reflection, I find it remarkable to be at this point with a full draft of a book and two complete versions of the bookmark. In the three years of this program most of my obstacles have been personal. My father passed away after months in the hospital, losing the battle to a very late and progressive diagnosis of ALS. I spent the end of the 2019 fall semester and the beginning of the 2020 spring semester researching and writing at his bedside. This significant loss, and the ensuing grief that followed, set me off course. It seemed I was always catching up, catching my breath, and falling behind again. Add to this moving twice, a change in vocation, a global pandemic, and personal health issues of my own. It is no surprise that I have had to take more than one incomplete. Yet through the support and encouragement of my cohort, project faculty professor, and many others, here we are. I look back and give thanks, for it is only by the grace of God.

The original table of contents for *Eucatastrophic Tales: Telling the Story of God Through Children's Literature*, was sketched after just two chapters were written. It contained 7 chapters

total. One on “Story Places” was cut because I did not have enough to say about it. I concluded that the idea of making reading memorable through the places we choose to read to children, could be added to an already existing chapter. The second chapter that was cut was intended to be about how children’s literature could help kids heal from trauma and build resiliency. I believe this is true, and have found some preliminary research that supports it, but I simply ran out of time to give it the attention it required. This is a chapter I was excited to write and stakeholders eager to read. Dropping it felt like a necessary move, but a disappointing one none the less. My hope is to return to this topic in the future as an additional chapter, essay, or project of its own.

When considering other viable alternative approaches to my NPO, it seems obvious to turn to digital resources like podcasts, videos, or a website. Early on I felt like I had encountered others who were already doing this well, while at the same time remaining open-minded to the possibility of developing digital resources in the future after I had produced a substantial print resource to build off of. Some might believe I’ve limited my reach by creating a physical book in a digital world. And I think they’d be right. Yet it was the magic of print and all its faith formation possibilities that I wanted to write about, so print seemed the only fitting medium for my project. Yet, to reiterate, I hope this print project leads to digital resources, at the very least, an audio version of the book, but likely much more.

After graduation, I plan to research the publishing process, leaning on my academic and professional networks to work towards sending my book to publishers. Lord willing, on the other side of that process I plan to organize a launch team that will help me promote the book to Christian universities, churches, and the general public. Once my book is published, I hope to design a website. This website will have information on the book but also more resources,

including additional articles that I and others will write. I plan to print and distribute the two bookmark versions immediately, even before graduation. I have a public library and local church eager to utilize them. After further feedback, I plan to produce 2-3 more themed versions of the bookmarks. Once the book is published, the bookmarks will have QR codes directing readers to the book's website.

Three years ago, I sat in a coffee shop with a Portland Seminary graduate asking questions about the Doctorate of Ministry in *Semiotics, Church, and Culture*. The dream even then was authoring a book about the faith formation possibilities of children's literature. Yet behind the curiosity and enthusiasm was a lot of self-doubt. I remember thinking with tears in my eyes that this is something I so desperately wanted to do. It mattered deeply. But I wasn't sure if I had what it takes. Turns out I didn't, at least on my own. Together with my stakeholders, cohort, professors and staff, family, and friends, I present this project.

Just before I began this journey, while exploring both PHD and DMin programs, a mentor of mine said something like, "Decide what you want to deeply immerse yourself in for the next 5 years so that you can generously give it away to the world in the 15 years after." I am so grateful I began this research journey with Portland Seminary. I am proud of what we've discovered, designed, and will deliver. I can't wait to share *Eucatastrophic Tales: Telling the Story of God Through Children's Literature*.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

The following is a brief description of the basic Need/Problem/Opportunity (NPO) that my project seeks to address, the scope of the project and the benchmarks by which it is assessed. These were developed over through the work and research outlined in Milestones 1-4 (see Appendices A-D).

**NPO STATEMENT:** Teachers of Children have underappreciated or not recognized the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** My project is a thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature, and a more accessible companion resource: a universal bookmark guide. The book will contain 5 chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The bookmark will be standard size, front and back with a side that appeals to children and a side that helps an adult facilitate a God-conversation with any children's book.

**PROJECT SCOPE:** The scope of my project extends into the areas of children's literature, childhood development, and faith formation, with special attention given to the importance of reading aloud to children, which makes faith conversations possible. It includes a dive into the essays of Christian fantasy writers, defending the use of fantasy and fairy tale. It explores the multicultural dimension of children's literature and seeks to answer the question, "What makes a children's book good?"

My research and project will be limited to the boundaries of early childhood through adolescence, including picture books, middle grade chapter books, some graphic novels, and teen

fiction. While including a range of genres within fiction, it will give special attention to fantasy due to its potential for engaging the imagination, a key component for faith formation, but will exclude children's non-fiction, comic books, audiobooks, and film adaptations.

## **BENCHMARKS:**

### **Success benchmarks:**

- A professor expresses a desire to adopt the book as a part of their course syllabus.
- A public library expresses interest in displaying and distributing the bookmark in its children's department.
- A church expresses interest in utilizing children's literature in its discipleship programming for kids.
- Teachers and parents express interest in reading the book and using the bookmark to facilitate conversations about God with children.

### **Quality benchmarks:**

- Children find the bookmark to be visually appealing and the prompts to be an enjoyable and meaningful way to engage in the books they are reading.
- Parents find the bookmark to be easy to use and effective in facilitating conversations about God with a children's book.

## PRESENTATION/DOCUMENTATION OF PROJECT

### Book Cover Art

The following artwork was designed in collaboration with a graphic artist for the front and back cover of my book, *Eucatastrophic Tales: Telling the Story of God Through Children's Literature*. My overall vision for the design was to represent general children's literature imagery as stained-glass windows in order to communicate that children's literature, like the stained-glass art in churches, can tell the story of God. Along with the table of contents for my book, I shared various illustrated versions of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The Hobbit* with the graphic artist. Included in that was one New Zealand edition of *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* that depicted a framed view of looking through C.S. Lewis' wardrobe.

A wardrobe framing, along with a lamppost from *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, made it to the final draft. I wanted the lamppost included for two reasons. First, it was the image of a lamppost and a fawn with an umbrella that C.S. Lewis' first pictured in his mind that gave birth to his beloved children's book series, the kind of theologically rich children's literature I hope my book might inspire. Secondly, the lamppost, in the context of *The Magician's Nephew*, the second tale in which it shows up, is evidence that the worlds of London and Narnia overlap. Likewise, children's literature can be a place where Heaven and earth overlap.

The wardrobe frame is not merely a nod to C.S. Lewis' beloved series, it is a metaphor for children's literature that I explore in the book. The dragon is another key metaphor that serves as the thread for the introduction of the book and is also a nod to Tolkien's own illustrations in *The Hobbit*. While considering different sketches for the book artwork, it was the



dragon that children and adults alike were most often drawn to. There's a story in the dragon, it's not just an image, and I hope it will invite the reader in.

The back cover is framed in the stained-glass scales and eyes of a Tolkien-like dragon. This was artwork pulled from one of the original sketches that was not chosen in its entirety, but the frame was selected because it fit with the theme of the dragon on the front cover. It wasn't until later that I realized that the illustrated eyes depict well the eyes of the-dragon-that-had-been-Eustace in Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. In that tale, it was the tear-filled, human-like eyes that first clued in his companions that it was indeed their lost friend in scaly form and no mere dragon, leading to Eustace's rescue and transformation. Likewise, children's literature has the power to open us up to the humanity in another's set of eyes.



Figure 1—Front Book Cover Art. Illustration by Audrey Masters.



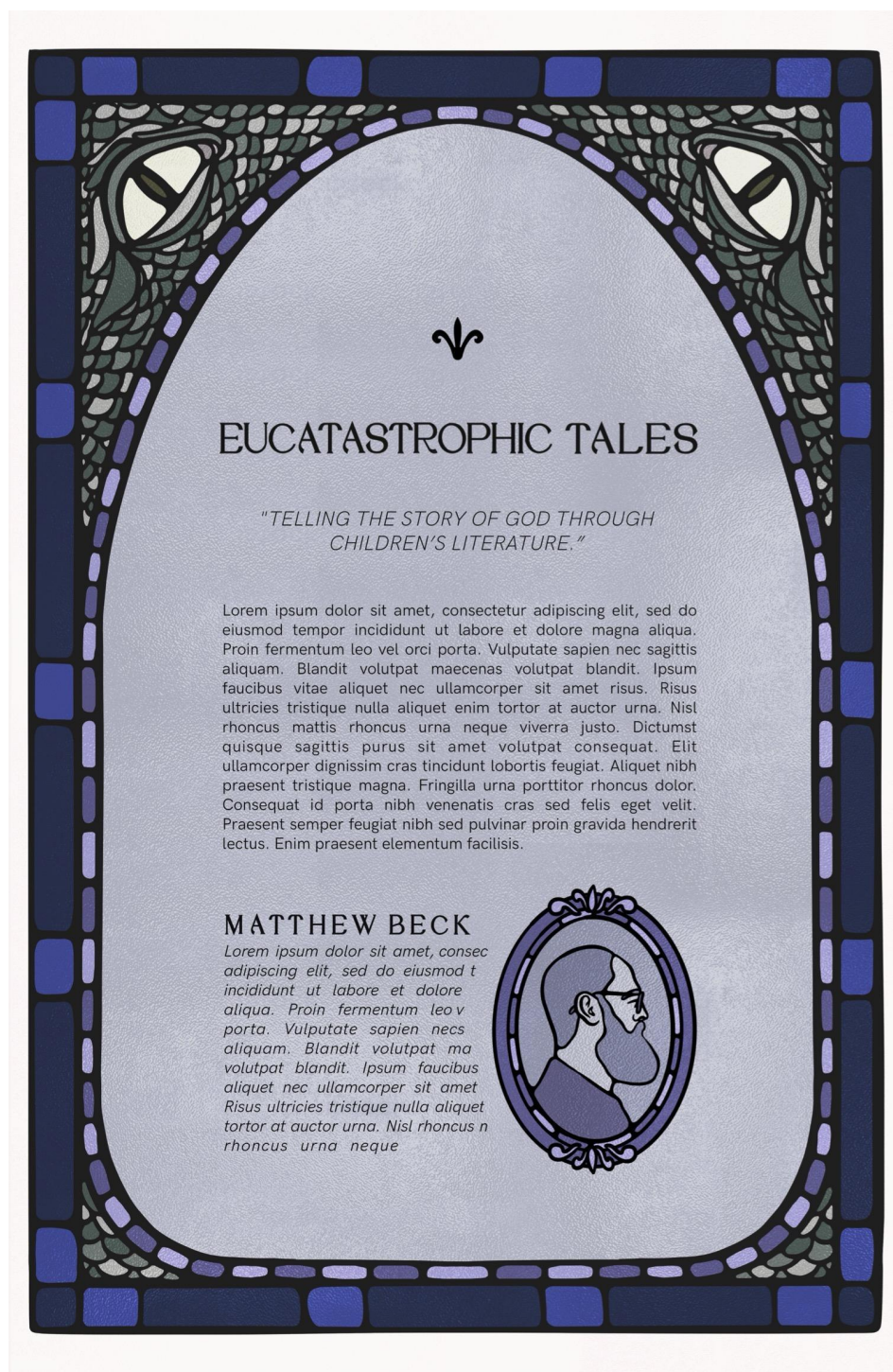


Figure 2—Back Cover Artwork. Illustration by Audrey Masters.

## The Bookmark

The following artwork was also designed in collaboration with a graphic artist for my universal bookmark guide. It retains the same stained-glass style and dragon imagery of the book cover. The design vision for the bookwork was to be aesthetically pleasing to children while practically useful for adults.

The bookmark is a companion resource to my book, *Eucatastrophic Tales: Telling the Story of God Through Children's Literature*, but can serve as a stand-alone tool for adults to lead conversations with children about God. For older children, the bookmark can also function as a personal reflection tool. However, the prompts are most effective if accompanied with conversation in a one-on-one or small group setting.

I have produced two different versions of the bookmark. The theme of the first bookmark is "Finding God in the Story." It helps the reader explore their perceived sense of God's presence and absence in the story, as well as imagine how the story might change or end differently if God were to show up. There are five questions in total, intentionally simple and open-ended. The hope is that children and adults find talking about God through children's literature to be uncomplicated and joy-filled.

The theme of the second bookmark is based on Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's research on multicultural children's literature. Using the title and metaphors of her foundational essay, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," this bookmark is designed for middle grade or older students to use a reflective tool before, during, and after reading. Yet again, however, it is most effective when paired with conversation in a one-on-one or small group setting. If the first bookmark was designed with the read-aloud in mind, the second is fitted for the book club. This bookmark helps children examine the similarities and differences between themselves and one or

more of the story's characters, while moving them toward a specific action step that will increase their greater cultural competency.

The bookmark will take two different print forms, one with a QR code linking the bookmark to a future website that will feature my book and related articles, and the other without a direct link to my book. The hope is that the "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" version without a link will be used in the public school and library setting.





Figure 3—“Finding God in the Story” Bookmark. Illustration by Audrey Masters.





Figure 4—“Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” Bookmark. Illustration by Audrey Masters.

## Table of Contents

The following is the table of contents for my book, *Eucatastrophic Tales: Telling the Story of God Through Children's Literature*. The book includes an introduction, 5 chapters, and a conclusion.

Intro: The Faith Formation Possibilities of Children's Literature

Why kids still need good books and why this one needed to be written.

1. Mirrors, Windows, and Wardrobes

How children's literature tells us about ourselves and others, and how it can take us to other worlds, bringing us back different than we started.

2. The *Eucatastrophic* Tale

Why Tolkien, Lewis, L'Engle, and others believed that children's literature could uniquely tell the Story of God.

3. Story Conversations

How read-alouds can lead to conversations about God, where adults and children both make discoveries.

4. Story-Switching

Learning how to switch back and forth between the Bible, children's literature, and the world of the child to find the through-line of faith.

5. Cloaks and Compasses, Bread and Wine

Why magical objects are signs of how God works in the world, and how to unpack the metaphors in children's literature to point to God.

Conclusion: Calling All Sub-Creators

Why we desperately need a new generation of theologian-storytellers to write and share true myths for young and old readers alike.



### **The Book: Sample Chapters**

The following is the introduction and two sample chapters from my book, *Eucatastrophic Tales: Telling the Story of God Through Children's Literature*. The entire book will be submitted for publication following this program. For the evaluation committee, the remaining chapters can be found in Appendix E.

This is a book about the faith formation possibilities of children's literature for teachers of children. It was written with universities, churches, classrooms, libraries, and living rooms in mind. I aimed to create a well-researched manual that could be adopted for college courses, and at the same time, an easy to read, practical guide that busy parents or volunteers could absorb quickly. But more than just a manual or a guide, it is a celebration of stories and the Story of God.

## Introduction: The Faith Formation Possibilities of Children's Literature

“Edmund or Lucy or you would have recognized it at once, but Eustace had read none of the right books.” – C.S. Lewis, *The Dawn Treader*

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, an insufferable boy named Eustace along with his two cousins, Edmund and Lucy, fall through a framed picture into another world. That place just happened to be Narnia, a magical land Edmund and Lucy had been once before in another adventure. This was, however, Eustace's first such experience, one he inconveniently did not believe in, nor much fancy being a part of. The picture he and his cousins fell into was a painting of a ship at sea, a boat called the “Dawn Treader” that belonged to a king named Caspian, who was accompanied by a mouse, a dwarf, and many other friends. On this unwelcomed vessel and with such poor company, Eustace would experience many things that he found to be “ghastly,” including a storm that lasted, to his count thirteen days, “though the others all say it was only twelve. Pleasant to be embarked on a dangerous voyage with people who can't even count right,” he complained to his journal.<sup>1</sup>

Where the storm lands the Dawn Treader, and the reason for me telling you of this tale, is an island with a high mountain. There, after wandering away on his own and getting lost, Eustace meets a dragon. Except Eustace has never even heard of a dragon, let alone seen one. So, when he comes face-to-face with a scaly, smoke-breathing creature, he doesn't know what he is

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1952), 58.

looking at. “Edmund or Lucy or you would have recognized it at once, but Eustace had read none of the right books,” C.S. Lewis narrated.<sup>2</sup>

***This is a book about books.***

What Eustace lacked in his moment of great danger and opportunity; he could have gained through reading. Had his eyes, some years earlier, scanned the letters “d,r,a,g,o,n” for the first time and had he, upon reading the description that followed, created an image in his mind of a flying, fire-breathing monster where previously there had been no registry for one, he would have recognized what he was facing at once, no matter how much it differed from the picture in his imagination. This is a book that defiantly and joyfully celebrates books. In a digital age filled with flickering screens, books still shine. And it is for this reason that I do not believe that literature is threatened by technology or that we must choose one or the other for our kids, meaning screens or books. Both hold a meaningful place in our lives, and books have yet to lose their magic.

There are guides for a healthy and active digital citizenship for children, you just won’t get that here. And you especially won’t find an outline of the dangers of technology and how it threatens print. Any such treatise would be amiss. Kids’ books are alive and well.<sup>3</sup> One beloved

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 68

<sup>3</sup> Alex Green, “Children's Institute 9: Children's Books Continue Run of Strong Sales,” PublishersWeekly.com, September 2, 2021, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/87280-children-s-institute-9-children-s-books-continue-run-of-strong-sales.html>. Book sales for children’s literature in 2021 were projected to be 9% higher than 2020 and perhaps the highest since 2016, according to the NPD Group.

professor of Children's Literature is calling the proliferation of excellent kids' books a "second golden age of children's literature,"<sup>4</sup> and I dedicate these pages to all its possibilities.

Literacy and reading comprehension are touchstones for all other subjects of learning.<sup>5</sup> The participatory nature of books uniquely nurtures a child's imagination.<sup>6</sup> Their pace invites pauses for reflection that take children both deep within themselves and far outside themselves.<sup>7</sup>

In short, reading introduces children to dragons. The stories kids read, or have read to them, set them up for the challenges and opportunities they will inevitably face, and books give children the plot for flourishing. We can't protect them from suffering, but we can prepare them. Our presence is the best we have to offer children, but the stories we give them also provide support. Books give kids characters that develop their own character. Those they encounter in the stories they read serve sometimes as guides and at other times as warnings inviting children to live a life that is "good and true."<sup>8</sup>

***This is a book about children's books.***

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<sup>4</sup> McCracken, John (Professor of Education, Indiana Wesleyan University). Interview with Matthew Beck. December 4, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, 7<sup>th</sup> Ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 4

<sup>6</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 7

<sup>7</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Collected Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1990), <https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Karen Swallow Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding The Good Life through Great Books* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 26

Lewis said Eustace had read none of the “right books.” In this case, he means the ones about dragons of course. They would have prepared Eustace for his moment. But are there such things as the “right books?” Is there a list of specific books or a certain genre of books that all kids should read or have read to them? Many have made such lists; indeed, I am tempted to do so here.

I, instead, hope to show you how children might pick up anything in their section of the library, not just the books someone, somewhere has determined to be the right or good ones. The benefits of reading for children are not dependent on good books, but on developing good readers of any book. It’s not merely the stories we give children that shape them but how we talk to them about these stories. That they can learn from any character, virtuous or not, if reflected upon deeply, is why any book will do.

Good books are not hard to find these days anyway, and our bookshelves are more inclusive and diverse than ever. That being said, if you combine good readers with good books, you’ll have a potent spell for the good life. As a fair warning, in this book I will give my exclusive attention to children’s fiction over nonfiction, demonstrate a preference for the elements of fantasy, and praise the multiple dimensions of picture books. But nearly everything in the pages to follow could be applied to any book in the children’s section of your local library or bookshop, online or in person.

***This is a book about the faith formation possibilities of children’s books.***

In our dragon story, Eustace not only encounters a dragon, he becomes one. His becoming one is less a transformation but a realization that he has acted the dragon of his story

up until this point. The author doesn't leave Eustace that way forever, just long enough for him to reflect on his nature and impact on others. After his several days as a dragon, Eustace goes through a painful process of shedding his nasty scales, emerging as a different boy, or at least "he had begun to be a different boy," we are told.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, from his transformed nature Eustace repairs broken relationships and becomes a contributing character in the rest of the story's adventures.

Most children's literature is didactic in nature, meaning kids' books aim to teach something, offer a moral, or inspire the reader toward a particular vision of goodness, truth, or beauty. It is this potential for development that makes children's literature useful in faith formation. Any religion or faith tradition can utilize children's literature in shaping kids. Some of the approaches I offer in the following pages could even be used to have children question religion or the existence of God. But from the start, you should know that this is a book that explores how children's literature can help adults and kids talk about the God of the Old and New Testament in the Christian Bible.

You'll also find a very "generous orthodoxy" here. While doing the research for this book, I often found myself talking to adults who asked a version of this question: "How can I talk to children about God when I don't know what I believe about God anymore?" This book will be useful for those of us who hold the surest of faith, but I wrote the following pages thinking of those of us who still hold on to a form of Christianity, but are unsure if the old ways of talking about God with children still work. In other words, I hope this book can be helpful if you're a Sunday school teacher and if you're a parent who is hesitant to take your child to Sunday school. There's room for all of us in these pages.

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 92

After all, *this is a book about children's books for teachers of children.*

By “teachers of children,” I mean anyone who is or wishes to care for or influence kids. You might hold a special space for a child already as a school teacher, mentor, librarian, or children’s pastor. Or you may be reading this in anticipation of nurturing a child’s wellbeing, as an education student, soon-to-be parent, or writer. If you want to talk to kids about God but never considered using children’s literature, this book is for you. If you love children’s literature and always suspected the stories to be as sacred as the ones in stained-glass church windows, yet couldn’t ever articulate why, this book is for you.

In chapter 1, we’ll turn to the multicultural work of Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita of Education at Ohio State University. Her foundational essay entitled, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” will show us how children’s literature tells children about themselves and others, and even moves them toward change and action. In chapter 2, we’ll examine the key historical voices of Tolkien, Lewis, and L’Engle, who all believed that children’s literature could uniquely tell the Story of God. Pulling from other contemporary voices, we’ll attempt to answer the question of, “What makes a children’s book good?”

In Chapters 3 and 4, building off the classic handbook on reading aloud to children from Jim Trelease, we’ll explore the power of talking about books with kids, where children and adults alike make discoveries. Then, I’ll give a practical guide for how to switch back and forth between the Bible, children’s literature, and the world of the child to find the through-line of faith.

In chapter 5, we'll look closer at magical objects as signs of how God works in the world, and how to unpack the metaphors in children's literature to point to God. Finally, I'll conclude this journey by making a case for why we desperately need a new generation of theologian-storytellers to read and write true myths for young and old readers alike.



## Chapter 1: Mirrors, Windows, and Wardrobes

“And that was the moment when Sofia first knew  
 Being brave means doing the thing you *must* do,  
 Though your heart cracks with fear.  
 Though you’re just in Grade Two.”

- Andrea Beaty, *Sofia Valdez, Future Prez*

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In a 1990 essay titled “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita of Education at The Ohio State University, describes the developmental power of children’s literature. She offers three images to explain how books are not mere entertainment, but stories that transform. Sometimes a book is a mirror in that through the narrative or characters we can catch a glimpse of ourselves. They are a “means of self-affirmation” and we read in order to not feel alone, for identity, or perhaps even to discover something new about ourselves yet to be revealed or unleashed.<sup>10</sup> A child who has discovered a mirror in a book might start embodying and playacting a favorite character or may simply walk away after reading the story with a fresh confidence in their own neurodiversity, physical ability, personality, culture, or ethnicity.

Beyond a mirror, a book may also become a window. Rather than reflecting a child’s own lived experience or inner world, a book that is a window shows her the experience of another person. As a window, children’s literature can expand the imagination of a child by

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<sup>10</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” *Collected Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1990), <https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

opening his mind up to seeing a world that is different than his own. “Did you know that...?” is the reflective phrase of a child who has experienced a window through children’s literature.

Books that are really effective windows can also become sliding glass doors. “Readers have only to walk through in imagination to become a part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author.”<sup>11</sup> The difference of outcome is that a window gives you perspective while a sliding glass door grants you empathy. There is an emotional connection that pulls the reader into the story. These worlds can be real or fantasy, but the point is that they show the reader something new, invites them in, and sends them home forever changed.

That books can be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors points to the faith formation possibilities of children’s literature. As a mirror, the book has the potential to reflect the image of God in the reader. As a window, the book can answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” And as a sliding glass door, the book can invite the reader into the story of God and reveal their role in the grand narrative. For this reason, as we’ll see in the next chapter, Sims Bishop’s metaphor of a sliding glass door might easily be substituted with C.S. Lewis’s magical wardrobe. But before we get there, let’s look at two children’s books that fluently function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors.

When 2020 Newbery Medal winner, Jerry Craft, writes, he sets out to create mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. His website says, “I make the books I wish I had when I was a kid.”<sup>12</sup> This is exactly what he does in his graphic novel, *New Kid*, dedicated “to the Jordan Banks in all of us.” *New Kid* tells the story of seventh grader Jordan Banks, whose sudden

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<sup>11</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” *Collected Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1990), <https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Craft, “Jerry Craft.” Jerry Craft, 2022. <https://jerrycraft.com>

enrollment into Riverdale Academy requires him to navigate being black in a predominantly white school. Like Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*, *New Kid* is a book that draws attention to the ongoing switching children of color have to do when navigating two cultures. Jordan, who loves to draw, illustrates this chameleon effect in his sketchbook, depicting himself with his hood up, looking tough when in Washington Heights, and at Riverdale, hood down, sunglasses off, and markers put away so as not to look suspicious.

The book never mentions the word “microaggression,” but it explores the experiences of kids of color in settings when they are in the minority as they face subtle but ongoing instances of discrimination. Maury gets called “Maury-O,” because it rhymes with oreo, poking fun at the fact that Maury appears to be multi-racial. A black student named Drew is consistently called “DeAndre” by the same teacher, the name of one of the other few black students in school. The librarian picks out a book about a protagonist who grew up poor and without a father for a student of color, wrongly assuming his own dad wasn’t around for his childhood. Ramon is Nicaraguan, but despite telling his classmate Andy this since kindergarten, is asked regularly about Mexican food. These are just a few of the scenes of microaggressions that Craft explores.

Because *New Kid* is a graphic novel it allows the reader to explore not just the dialogue in these moments, but the facial expressions and thoughts of each character. This full range effect creates clear mirrors and windows for readers of all kinds. Listeners who are like Jordan, Maury, Ramon, and Drew are invited to explore their own feelings and experiences related to their race and ethnicity. They may walk away from this book feeling seen or empowered to advocate for themselves and others. Readers who are like Andy and Ms. Rawle are graciously granted a window into how their words and actions, unintended or not, affect their minority students and peers. This then becomes a mirror for introspection. They will hopefully emerge from the story

not only examining their participation, even passively, in a system that rewards and considers whiteness the norm, but are also inspired to take small steps that “interrupt the cycle of racism” in their schools.<sup>13</sup> Having conversations about race and ethnicity requires courage and vulnerability. Graphic novels like *New Kid* offer a safe entry into dialogue that can help children see a mirror of themselves, an open window to others, and a sliding glass door leading to action and change.

The award winning and wildly popular *The Questioners* picture book series, written by Andrea Beaty and illustrated by David Roberts, gives us another excellent example of how children’s literature can function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Sofia Valdez, Future Prez* tells the story of a kind and industrious second grader and her *abuelo*, who regularly help the “shut-in” elderly of their community. After a disastrous squirrel chase through the local landfill that left her grandfather injured, Sofia’s helpful spirit inspires her to replace the town dump with a new park. She courageously takes her proposal to the city hall where she at first is told it couldn’t be done by someone so young. Sophia would not be deterred, making an appeal to the entire local government of Blue River Creek. During her presentation she made this self-discovery:

And that was the moment when Sofia first knew

Being brave means doing the thing you *must* do,

Though your heart cracks with fear.

Though you’re just in Grade Two.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Beverley Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* (New York: Basic books, 2017), 199

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Beaty and David Roberts, *Sofia Valdez, Future Prez* (New York: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2019), 30

After a convincing speech, Sophia gets permission to launch a petition and ends up mobilizing the entire town for her project. The story concludes with the powerful realization that one day Sophia could become president.

As inspiring as *Sophia Valdez, Future Prez* is, the fiction of the story is that there has never been a woman president. A Latino has sadly never served in the highest office of the United States. Yet, this is precisely why books that offer diversity and representation matter. “The power of literature is that it can build schemata, background knowledge, and vocabulary that enable readers to question why the problems exist in the first place.”<sup>15</sup> Why can’t a latina woman be the president of the United States? The story simply and emphatically answers the question with, “Why not!” but *Sophia Valdez, Future Prez* opens a sliding glass door for the readers to more deeply examine the topics of sexism and discrimination. Furthermore, Beaty and Roberts invite us to imagine and enact a better reality by offering a vision of what could be, a vision like the one captured by Pete Souza, former chief official white house photographer, on May 8, 2009.

The picture depicts 5-year-old Jacob in the Oval office curiously touching the top of the president’s head as he leans over in the direction of the boy. Souza, in his book *Obama: An Intimate Portrait* gives context to the snapshot that inspired the nation. Jacob, touring the white house with his father that day, asks President Barack Obama if his hair felt just like his. “Why don’t you see for yourself,” the president replied and invited him to discover that, yes, the president’s hair feels just like his.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lester L. Laminack and Katie Kelly, *Reading to Make a Difference* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2019), xviii

<sup>16</sup> Pete Souza, *Obama: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017), 38

This is the same kind of identity-shaping moment children’s literature makes possible when it functions as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. “When we read and explore authentic literature, we create spaces...where children can question norms, challenge stereotypes, and expand their understanding of the unfamiliar, leading to great tolerance, acceptance, and equity.”<sup>17</sup> Children can’t become what they’ve never imagined. Providing kids with diverse books can both build new possibilities and tear down broken systems.

Yet what does this have to do with faith formation? “God has shown you, o mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?” the prophet, Micah, asks the people to consider, “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>18</sup> The goal of children’s spiritual formation is not that they simply know certain ideas about God, or even believe and accept the right truths, but that they grow into the kinds of people God invites them to become - people who love their neighbor as themselves.<sup>19</sup> Both *New Kid* and *Sofia Valdez, Future Prez* hold this kind of faith formation possibility.

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<sup>17</sup> Laminack and Kelly, *Reading to Make a Difference*, xvi

<sup>18</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 22:39

## Chapter 2: The *Eucatastrophic* Tale

“Tollers, there is too little of what we like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.”

- Lewis to Tolkien in 1936<sup>20</sup>

On the journey of uncovering the faith formation possibilities found in children’s literature, one’s search would be amiss not to consider the great 20th century Christian fantasy writers, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. These friends and collaborators are not alone in their literary contribution as Christians who wrote fiction, but the reach of their works is vast and ongoing. And, of particular interest to my question of faith formation through children’s literature, they have both, separately, written in defense of fairy tales. One would also do well to ponder the literary impact of Madeleine L’Engle, whose stories have led many wandering souls to truth through fiction. She, like Lewis and Tolkien, was often called on to debate the validity of her genre. Perhaps their arguments might help us make the case for the faith formation possibilities in children’s literature in the 21st century.

“I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say,” exclaimed Lewis in his similarly titled essay, *Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said*, originally published in *The New York Times* Children’s Book section in

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<sup>20</sup> Diana Pavlac Glyer, *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings* (Kent, Ohio: Black Squirrel Books, 2016), 39

1956.<sup>21</sup> But what was it exactly that Lewis had to say? Or to put it more aptly, what story was Lewis trying to tell? A clue is found in his reflection:

I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood...But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency?<sup>22</sup>

Lewis wanted to communicate what Sunday school and stained-glass windows attempted to communicate to him: the Story of God, and concluded that the best form for that was children's literature. What he helps us imagine here is profoundly practical, a new kind of Sunday school curriculum, a catechism of fictional stories, a teacher carrying picture books and fairy tales. But what makes fantasy the best vehicle for the most fantastic Story?

Lewis takes us on a journey to answer this question. In another write-up, most often recognized as *On Stories* from *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* in 1947, but originally titled, *The Kappa Element in Fiction*, he draws our attention to the "hidden" element (the meaning of "kappa") found in fairy tales and fantasy.<sup>23</sup> This hidden element is in part the story's "peripeteia" or moment of surprise. But it's not the act of being surprised that the reader seeks, Lewis says, it's the "surprisingness," the quality of the surprise.<sup>24</sup> To better understand this hidden element of children's literature we must look to Tolkien.

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien asserts that the true fairy-story is a "eucatastrophic tale," meaning that it not merely gives the reader the happy ending, but "the

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<sup>21</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1966), 37

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, viii

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17



good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn.’”<sup>25</sup> Joy is what the fairy-tale can say best. Joy is the hidden element. Joy is the curriculum of the Sunday school teacher. But this “sudden miraculous grace” is not a shallow joy, says Tolkien. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure.” Rather, it rejects “universal final defeat.”<sup>26</sup> Madeleine L’Engle is helpful on this point, as well, who wrote in *Walking on Water*: “Art is an affirmation of life, a rebuttal of death.”<sup>27</sup> This is why Tolkien calls the *eucatastrophic* tale “evangelium.”<sup>28</sup> It is gospel, or at the very least, it points to the Gospel. Children’s literature that contains *eucatastrophe*, can tell the story of God or be used to tell the story of God.

In a 2016 essay entitled “What Makes a Children’s Book Good?” New York Times bestselling author of “A Tale Dark and Grimm,” “In a Glass Grimmly,” and “The Grimm Conclusion,” Adam Gitwitz, attempts to find his own answer to Lewis’ question of the hidden element found in children’s literature, though he looks for it by jumping into the timeless debate of what makes a book for kids “good.” Gitwitz organizes the conversation into two camps: those who take a “content-oriented” approach to the question and those who take a “results-oriented” approach. Aware of Lewis’ contribution to the discourse, Gitwitz locates him in the “results-oriented” camp, citing Lewis’ insistence that “a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story. The good ones last.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, Tolkien put it even better: “[Children’s] books like their clothes should allow for growth, and their books at any rate should

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<sup>25</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988) 68

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>27</sup> Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2001), 186

<sup>28</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 69

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 24

encourage it.”<sup>30</sup> What makes a book for kids good to Lewis and Tolkien? That the story is a shirt that always fits, that they can put back on from time to time, wearing it in and through their adulthood. This, Gidwitz says, is writing children’s stories with an outcome in the mind. “Good,” for these voices, means lasting. In his attempt to answer the question for himself, it is not surprising that Gidwitz references Lewis.

Like Lewis, Gidwitz’s books have been widely read and loved by children and adults alike, they each borrowed from other epics for their own stories, and similarly both authors have had to defend fairy tales from literary critics, parents, and teachers of children along the way. In a 2012 article in *The Wallstreet Journal’s* Speakeasy blog, Gidwitz lays out his treatise in defense of fairy tales, retelling the story of a canceled visit to an elementary school where he was scheduled to read excerpts from his reimagined version of Grimm’s fairy tales. Resistance to Grimm’s fairy tales, in their original and remade versions, is not new, nor is the universal love for them by children, says Gidwitz. But why are kids still interested in fairy tales? The answer to this question might help Gidwitz answer the first, of what makes a children’s book good.

That curious children are enthralled by the gruesomeness of the stories, is the first appeal to fairy tales that Gidwitz identifies, not likely appeasing his censors. That they know the stories are exaggerated or made up is the second reason kids are still drawn to fairy tales, he says, adding that this is also the factor that makes kids not afraid of Grimm (a very good rebuttal to those who reject the merits of fairy tales based on his first reason). And finally, Gidwitz shares the third reason why these tales still capture the attention of their readers: “The land of the fairy

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<sup>30</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 46

tale is not the external world. It is, rather, the internal one.”<sup>31</sup> Gidwitz, here, sounds a lot like acclaimed author and psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, that what makes fairy tales unique as a genre is that “in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, [fairy tales] start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being.”<sup>32</sup>

What Bettelheim and Gidwitz’s are saying, and for that matter Sims Bishop, is that these old and bloody tales are a fresh and clear mirror to the interior life of the reader. They show the child another world, inside themselves. But not just a mirror, also a window and sliding glass door, for “fairy tales share the archetypal structure of every story of growth.”<sup>33</sup> With a fairy tale, a child might learn something about themselves, they might ponder the situation of another, and they might go on a journey to return home forever changed. What makes a children’s book good? Here might lie Gidwitz’s answer. But before we draw a final conclusion, let us revisit once more J.R.R. Tolkien.

Gidwitz’s insistence that fairy tales are all essentially different versions of one universal story template fits Tolkien’s idea of sub-creation, “his conviction that human creativity is a reflection of the Divine.”<sup>34</sup> It is in the poem *Mythopoeia* that we are introduced to humanity as sub-creators, or “little makers,”<sup>35</sup> written in part as a recollection of the legendary conversation

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Gitwitz, “In Defense of Real Fairy Tales”, *Speakeasy: The Wall Street Journal*, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/10/14/the-forest-beckons-the-magic-of-real-fairy-tales/>

<sup>32</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 6

<sup>33</sup> Adam Gitwitz, “In Defense of Real Fairy Tales,” *The Wall Street Journal*

<sup>34</sup> Diana Glyer, *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings* (Kent, Ohio: Black Squirrel Books, 2016), 130.

<sup>35</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 89.

he and Hugo Dyson had with C.S. Lewis,<sup>36</sup> the conversation that led to Lewis' conversation to Christianity, which he came to believe to be a "true myth."<sup>37</sup> Not only is Christianity a true myth to Tolkien, it validates myth-making. "Fantasy," he says, "remains a human right, we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, our creations mimic the Creator, and much more profound than telling us more about ourselves, our own stories tell us about God. Gitwitz's idea that fairy tales all follow one archetype, combined with Tolkien's concept of sub-creation, not only helps us answer the question of what makes a kid's book good, it leads us to consider that perhaps the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature is that they are all signs pointing toward the one "Great Eucatastrophe," the final joyous turn.<sup>39</sup>

What makes a children's book good, concludes Gitwitz, is the response a child has to it. You'll know it when they clutch the book to their chest upon completion, the first or fourth time. They embrace the story, he says, "because those books help them find meaning in life, be it moral, psychological, or ineffable."<sup>40</sup> Not entertainment, not escape, but joy is the ultimate indicator of a good book. The good book is the one that leaves a mark. It turns out Lewis' metaphor of a wardrobe in his beloved Narnia series, captures the faith formation possibilities in children's literature. The books themselves are magical wardrobes, transporting the child through

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 188.

<sup>37</sup> Diana Glyer, *Bandersnatch*, 16

<sup>38</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Adam Gitwitz, "What Makes a Children's Book Good?," *Cultural Comment, The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-goosebumps-conundrum-what-makes-a-childrens-book-good>.

their imagination to another world and back. And when they arrive they are different, just like the Pevensie children who tumble back through the wardrobe after their adventures. “Kids will like a book with a great story. But they will only love a book that makes them see the world in a new way,” says Gidwitz.<sup>41</sup> The magic of Narnia is not so much Narnia itself, for what good is Narnia if it does not change London. The magic of Narnia, and any good book, is that it leaves the reader transformed, and in turn, the world into which the reader returns. And this is never more true when a child has an adult guide.

Note: For the final project portfolio submission, Chapters 3-5 and a conclusion were included in Appendix E for the evaluation committee to review but were removed for archiving in order to protect the content for future publication possibilities.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

## ASSESSMENT

From the start, my hope for this project was that children would find God in the books that they read. For this to happen, I knew that teachers of children had to believe in the faith formation possibilities of children's literature. So, I imagined a book that was theoretical enough to fit in the college classroom while, at the same time, practical enough to be useful in homes for busy parents. It had to be convincing, but it also had to capture the imagination of the reader, just like children's literature. The ultimate impact of my book would be on children but the aim of my book was to serve those who had influence on them. With the help of my stakeholders, I imagined one other thing: a bookmark that any adult or mature child could pick up and use immediately with any book off the bookshelf to have a conversation about God. This bookmark could be a standalone tool or a companion resource with the book. After 200 hours, I believe I have achieved this goal and met a series of benchmarks, indicating that my project is a success and demonstrates exceptional quality, while still having room to improve and expand.

Throughout my research and project development, I've thought of "teachers of children" to be actual school teachers but also many other people, including parents, mentors, children's pastors, Sunday school teachers, librarians, authors, or anyone who is in some way overseeing the development of children. Yet early on I had future school teachers in mind, specifically those being trained at a Christian university. At one such university, a professor of children's literature and education expressed interest in a book that could be adopted for his courses that would train young educators to find God in children's literature in order to share those discoveries with kids. This professor has not only cheered me on throughout the entire process, he has with each shared chapter, bookmark prototype, and finished project, reiterated the desire to use my project in his courses upon publication.

The success of the bookmark hinged on getting it in the hands of adults and children, and so one of my benchmarks would need to address access. The question of where I could display the bookmark led to the idea of producing a version of it that could be used in the public library setting. Bookmarks go with books, so why not display them where the most books are. After sharing the “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” themed version of the bookmark with the largest public library in my county, the director of the children’s department has expressed enthusiastic interest in displaying and distributing it to her patrons. This will not be the only place where I will promote the bookmark, but the prospect of getting my research into a highly trafficked, public space is an indicator of success.

The area where children’s literature is most underutilized is, unfortunately, the local church. For my project to be successful, I needed to convince churches of the faith formation possibilities of children’s literature. If I could do this, the key indicator will be a children’s ministry using my research and including children’s literature in their discipleship programming. Throughout the discovery, design, and delivery stages of my project, I have been working with a local church that has a Sunday morning children’s ministry of about 200 kids. Last summer we tested a curriculum that utilizes children’s literature during midweek programming and the storyteller, children’s pastor, volunteers, and kids all loved it. Now, as a volunteer storyteller myself, I have begun incorporating children’s books into the large group curriculum on Sunday mornings. Additionally, this local church has expressed interest in utilizing my project in three other ways: 1. Displaying my book and bookmark in the parent resource center, 2. Incorporating children’s literature in an upcoming family faith formation activity, 3. Displaying and distributing the bookmark in a new expansion of their non-profit, “pop-up,” indoor play space that serves hundreds of children in our county.

Through trial and error, along with feedback from key stakeholders, I simplified the bookmark from earlier prototypes so that it could be more easily produced and distributed. Rather than focusing on a bookmark that was “three-dimensional” and interactive, I shifted my focus to a concept that balanced excellent content and useability for adults with having an aesthetic appeal for children. Kids would have to like it enough to want to place it in a book. Parents would have to find it helpful. Working with a graphic artist, we developed a design that would incorporate universal imagery from children’s literature with a stained-glass theme, communicating the idea that children’s literature can be used, like stained-glass windows, to tell the Story of God. From a series of draft sketches, children were most drawn to the dragon imagery, both the full dragon selected for the cover and the dragon eyes on the bookmarks. One child commented that he liked the dragon because, “I want to know what happens!”

After conducting a 3-week book club using the “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” themed bookmark, I asked, “How might reading with these questions in mind changed your experience of the story?” A child responded, “I noticed more details...It helped me pay closer attention to the characters...I think new things about myself now and others.” Additionally, after sharing the two bookmark versions, book cover, table of contents, and sample chapters with a diverse group of “teachers of children,” the resounding conclusion is that adults enthusiastically want to use these resources to facilitate God conversations.

As I look to the horizon, I am eager to improve on the success of my project in at least two ways. First, I want to expand the number of versions of the bookmark from two to at least five by interviewing parents and children who have used the bookmarks for a longer period of time. Rather than producing one bookmark, early feedback helped me see that particular themes might be more effective for certain age groups, to fit personalities, for certain books and genres,



and for different life stages. Secondly, I realized one chapter originally outlined for the book would require much more research than the scope of this project. For a future edition of the book, I want to explore the intersection of children's literature and healing from trauma.

## PROJECT LAUNCH PLAN

### **Project Description**

**NPO STATEMENT:** Teachers of children have underappreciated or not recognized the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION:** A thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature, and a more accessible companion resource: a universal bookmark guide. The book currently contains 5 chapters plus an introduction and conclusion. The bookmark is standard size, front and back with a side that appeals to children and a side that helps an adult or mature child facilitate God-conversation with any children's book.

### **Audience**

The ultimate audience for my project is teachers of children. This includes school teachers, parents, children's ministry pastors and volunteers, librarians, authors, etc. I plan to engage with my audience by promoting and sharing my book and bookmark primarily with Christian universities and churches, but also anywhere where children's literature and children's spirituality overlaps.

### **Development Timeline**

#### **Spring 2022:**

- Print and distribute 100 bookmarks to interested public library, tracking the number of bookmarks picked up by children weekly. Resupply as needed.
- Print and distribute 100 bookmarks to interested local church and its partner non-profit, tracking the number of bookmarks picked up by children during each programming event. Resupply as needed.

- Share full draft of book with university professor interested in adopting it as a part of their course syllabus and children's pastor interested in displaying it as a part of the church's parent resource center.
- Create an expanded list of stakeholders, with expertise in areas that include higher education, teaching, writing, editing, and publishing, with whom I will share the full manuscript and who will offer critical feedback and iterative improvements, specifically evaluating the viability of this book to be both a university textbook and popular resource for parents and teachers.
- Research the process of getting my book published, leaning into my academic and professional network.
- Continue utilizing children's literature as a storyteller volunteer at local church

#### **Summer 2022:**

- Compile and evaluate critical feedback from expanded list of stakeholders. Decide on the viability of marketing the book as a university text or simply as a popular resource for parents and teachers. Make changes to manuscript in preparation to share the book with publishers.
- Make a list of additional libraries, churches, and Christian universities to promote my book and distribute the bookmark.
- Propose a course elective on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature to the university where I am currently employed.

#### **Fall 2022:**

- Compile a list of publishing houses based on my research. Send my book to publishers.
- Adapt, if needed, the 2 current bookmark versions based on ongoing feedback.

- Produce 2-3 more themed versions of the bookmark.
- Contact list of additional libraries, churches, and Christian universities to promote my upcoming book and distribute the bookmark through emails and visits.

### **Beyond:**

- Accept a publishing contract, or if none offered, self-publish book.
- Gather a launch team for my book. Launch team members will get an advanced review copy, review the book on Amazon or Goodreads, and promote the book on social media and within their circles of influence.
- Share published book with university professor interested in adopting it as a part of their course syllabus.
- Provide copies of published book with local church interested in displaying it as a part of their parent resource center.
- Develop a website with information on the book and bookmark, along with written articles, interviews, videos, or podcasts that further expand on the ideas from the book.

### **Iteration Process**

In order to continue to evaluate the bookmark, I will track the number of bookmarks taken by children in the spaces where it is displayed and distributed. A key indicator for the ongoing success of the bookmark is its appeal to a wider range of children in the public library and local church settings. Additionally, interviewing parents and children's ministry workers who are utilizing the bookmark to lead God-conversations at home and church, will help me improve the bookmark and develop new themed versions.

Ongoing evaluation of the book will occur as I share the manuscript with key stakeholders, both old and new. If I am able to secure a publisher, there will be a process of review and editing. Once the book is published, subsequent editions may allow me to improve or expand upon the research. Another possibility would be to develop a website with information on the book and bookmark, along with written articles, interviews, videos, or podcasts that further expand on the ideas from the book. There are tools that will allow me to track the number of site visits, articles read, videos watched, etc. Overall, the ongoing impact of my book will be evaluated based on the level of interest beyond the original stakeholders supporting the project. Examples of this would include more libraries and churches expressing interest in promoting and distributing the book and bookmark and a Christian university expressing interest in me designing and teaching a course on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature.

## APPENDIX A—MILESTONE 1 THE NPO CHARTER

### Personal Research Manifesto

I will seek to understand the need, problem, or opportunity and under-stand<sup>42</sup> the individuals to whom the NPO matters most. I will let gratitude, humility, and listening guide me so that I may mind my own bias.

### NPO Statement

Teachers of children<sup>43</sup> have underappreciated<sup>44</sup> or not recognized the power of children's literature,<sup>45</sup> to tell<sup>46</sup> the story of God<sup>47</sup>.

### NPO Scope

The scope of my research will extend into the areas of children's literature and childhood development, with special attention to the importance of reading aloud to children, which makes faith conversations possible. It will include a dive into the literature and essays of Christian fantasy writers and the potential use of fantasy fiction in faith formation.

My research will be limited to the boundaries of early childhood (picture books) and middle grade (chapter books). While including a range of fiction genres, it will focus on fantasy,

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<sup>42</sup> Adam Gidwitz, *The Inquisitor's Tale* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016) 8, Under-standing is the ancient sense of understanding. It means to stand under, to carry the weight of, to support.

<sup>43</sup> School teachers, parents, pastors, authors, but especially churches.

<sup>44</sup> Many have recognized that part of the magic of a fairy tale is its ability, through the creation of other worlds, to help children navigate their own inner worlds. But there is another use of enchantment. Fairy tales are myths that invite us into what Tolkien calls "True Myth."

<sup>45</sup> Especially fantasy and fairy tale

<sup>46</sup> Through images, metaphors, and "subcreation"

<sup>47</sup> As a tool for spiritual formation

due to its potential for engaging the imagination, a key component for faith formation. My research will exclude children's non-fiction.

### NPO Context

The ministry context of my NPO is primarily churches, specifically children's and youth ministries. My hunch is, churches more than any other context, have underappreciated or not recognized the potential of children's literature as a tool for faith formation. Beyond churches, my research will be useful for any teachers of children, including parents, mentors, school teachers, homeschool cohorts, and even authors who, while utilizing children's literature, may not know it's full potential. My research will be of benefit to any denomination or church size, though perhaps traditions that emphasize spiritual formation or have formal catechism will be most interested. Churches in communities with higher poverty rates and lower academic ratings might find an overlap between my research and their efforts to increase the literacy rate in their local schools.

### Root Causes

Why has children's literature been overlooked as a tool for spiritual formation? Potential root causes of my NPO include the church's preference for propositional over narrative truth, attitudes of *sola Scriptura* in the discipleship of children, and suspicion of fiction as a viable means of grace, specifically children's literature that is not overtly "Christian" in nature and message. Additional potential root causes include a lack of access to good children's literature in some communities, the absence of adults reading aloud to kids, or the lack of education to equip

adults to have the confidence in leading God conversations with children while using children's literature as a tool.

Why is children's literature as a tool for spiritual formation a need and opportunity for kids and adults alike? Children's literature, specifically fantasy, has the ability to grant access to the complex and mysterious truths of Christianity, grow empathy and emotional intelligence, and invigorate stale faith that is struggling to connect particularly with Scripture, but ultimately God.

#### Discovery Session Stakeholders

1. Theology professor with experience in teaching courses on faith and fantasy fiction
2. Children's pastor and founder of a nonprofit centered on transforming the community through play
3. Old Testament professor with expertise in family formation through OT festivals
4. Special Education professor with interest in children's literature as a tool for helping children with autism explore their emotions and faith
5. Teacher in the field with a personal testimony to the power of fantasy fiction for personal growth
6. Youth pastor who is curious about the potential uses fiction in the discipling of teens

#### One-on-One Interviews

1. New: Children's literature professor and Sunday School teacher who utilizing children's literature in his pedagogy
2. Discovery Session Follow-up: Special Education professor with interest in children's literature as a tool for helping children with autism explore their emotions and faith



3. Discovery Session Follow-up: Teacher in the field with a personal testimony to the power of fantasy fiction for personal growth

#### Academic Resources

The key fields I will explore are: children's literature textbooks, actual children's literature, the works and profiles of Christian fantasy writers, and research on fairy tale and fantasy's importance for early childhood development. I will take special interest in the works of these fantasy writers: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L'Engle. I will rely heavily on the scholarship of children's literature expert, Charlotte Huck, to build a case for utilizing all of children's literature, not just the works labeled "Christian," for faith formation. I will also survey children's curriculum and denominational catechesis.

## Appendix: Discovery Session Report

### Discovery Session Description

On November 7, I gathered my stakeholders<sup>48</sup> around a table with strategically placed children's fantasy novels and books on the importance of reading to kids for childhood development in order to remind each participant of the books they loved as a child and to set the stage for the conversation. I chose a conference room with a lot of natural lighting and stocked the space with fresh snacks and mineral water.

I reviewed and had each stakeholder sign a consent form, then launched into my proposed area of research, initial hunches, and personal connection to children's fantasy fiction. In turn, I invited each participant to share the impact of fantasy and fairy tale on their own lives and what interest they have in my research. From there, I followed closely the outlined NPO Discovery Session guide. The process went smoothly, although consensus on the "audience" was difficult and we failed to complete the NPO Discovery Statement. I posted on a whiteboard a space for stakeholders to add to my working bibliography throughout the conversation. I left time at the end for an open conversation on the important metaphors in children's literature: tesseracts, wardrobes, deluminators, magic rings, etc. I ended the session by thanking the participants and offering them a gift, the choice between two books: a recent Newbery Winner titled, *The Inquisitor's Tale* by Adam Gidwitz and a teaching resource called *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting* by Sarah Mackenzie.

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<sup>48</sup> A theology professor with experience in teaching courses on faith and fantasy fiction, a children's pastor and founder of a nonprofit centered on transforming the community through play, an Old Testament professor with expertise in family formation through OT festivals, a special education professor with interest in children's literature as a tool for helping children with autism explore their emotions and faith, a teacher in the field with personal testimony to the power of fantasy fiction for personal growth, and a youth pastor who is curious about the potential uses fiction in the discipling of teens.

### Discovery Statement

The stakeholders and I struggled to fit my area of research into the NPO statement, which while having clear practical implications, is more theoretical in nature. We never actually found a way to fit each sticky note exercise into the statement, but upon reflection, the following captures the conclusions of the group:

- Considering pastors (audience),
- we've discovered that fantasy fiction could help enliven the faith of bored, lonely, and lost Christians (NPO),
- which is caused by poor preaching and the stale reading of God's Word (root cause).
- If solved, it would mean new experiences of faith and a reconnection to God's Word (outcome).

### Critical Insights from Discovery Session

I was surprised that many of the stakeholders gravitated towards pastors as the primary audience, though there were some participants who were slow to agree, and conceded only when considering the impact on congregations through pastors. A common theme throughout each phase of the discovery session was the pain point of individuals, who for whatever reason feel disconnected from faith communities and Scripture, and the hope that fiction could reconnect them. A key phrase that grabbed my attention in the discovery session was "prevenient grace." As a theological distinctive within my denominational tradition<sup>49</sup>I want to explore this more.

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<sup>49</sup> The Wesleyan Church and the broader Methodist movement

I found a lot of affirmation in the conversation, as many ideas shared echoed what I had hypothesized or found in my early reading for research, particularly in the writings on fairy tale and fantasy from C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Madeleine L'Engle. For example, many stakeholders pointed towards fantasy fiction's ability to grow empathy in the reader, build hope through images of a new reality, and grant access to complex ideas, including the problem of pain and existence of God.

A final surprise was from some unintentional research. As we ended our time together, I thanked the stakeholders and invited them to pick between two books as a gift: one that was an actual fairy tale and one providing research on the importance of reading aloud to children. With only one exception, everyone took the fictional story. The only person who took the non-fiction option already had the fairy tale. Though it was a small sample size, I saw it as an indication that I was on the right track. There is something about these stories that we are drawn to. In the midst of all the non-fiction options we want a story to be told one and to enter into it.

### One-on-One Interview Discoveries

For my one-on-one interviews I selected one new person from the original Discovery Session group<sup>50</sup> and invited back two from the discovery session for follow-up conversations.<sup>51</sup> The children's literature professor was enthusiastic about my project and believed my area of research was underexplored. He added significantly to my bibliography, confirmed a lot of my

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<sup>50</sup> A children's literature professor and sunday school teacher who utilizes children's literature in his pedagogy

<sup>51</sup> A special education professor with interest in children's literature as a tool for helping children with autism explore their emotions and faith, and a teacher in the field.

hunches with his own research for his PHD in children's literature. Additionally, his findings while studying the impacts of reading aloud to children on early childhood development, urged me to give special attention to that aspect in my own research. Children's literature has significant potential to form children spiritually, he said, "especially if you talk about the book during and afterward."

Both the elementary teacher in the field and the professor of special education shared personal stories of how fantasy fiction shaped their faith and how they've used fantasy fiction in educating and mentoring children.<sup>52</sup> Both these interviews pointed toward the power of children's literature in its pace. Books are "slow enough" to help the reader pause and ponder.

### Synthesis

There was some overlap in the findings from the discovery session and one-on-one interviews, in part, because I invited two discovery session stakeholders to do follow-up interviews. However, these two candidates were selected for their unique contributions to the discovery session, at times differing from the rest of the stakeholders, particularly in their consideration for the audience. These two follow-up interviewees saw a potential for my research to serve children by resourcing their teachers<sup>53</sup> going against the rest of the group that favored research directed toward exploring the uses of fantasy fiction on development of the teachers themselves, particularly pastors. My third interview candidate, a children's literature professor,

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<sup>52</sup> One had a significant breakthrough in depression while identifying with a particular character in a fantasy fiction novel. One remarked that fantasy fiction was the context of nearly every faith conversation to date with her child who has autism.

<sup>53</sup> Parents, mentors, Sunday School teachers, etc.

emphasized more emphatically the need for research on fantasy fiction and the faith formation of children.

To summarize the findings of the discovery session and one-on-one interviews, I have concluded that my research should dive deeply into the potential of children's literature, with special attention to the genres of fantasy fiction and fairy tale, to spiritually form children, and to aim that research at developing a resource for churches that can be used in children's and youth ministry or by parents. In both the discovery session and one-on-one interviews, I tapped into deeply felt needs, primarily the need for new ways to talk about God with kids, and secondarily the need for new ways to revitalize the faith of adults.

#### Next steps

The possible areas that emerge for further exploration include:

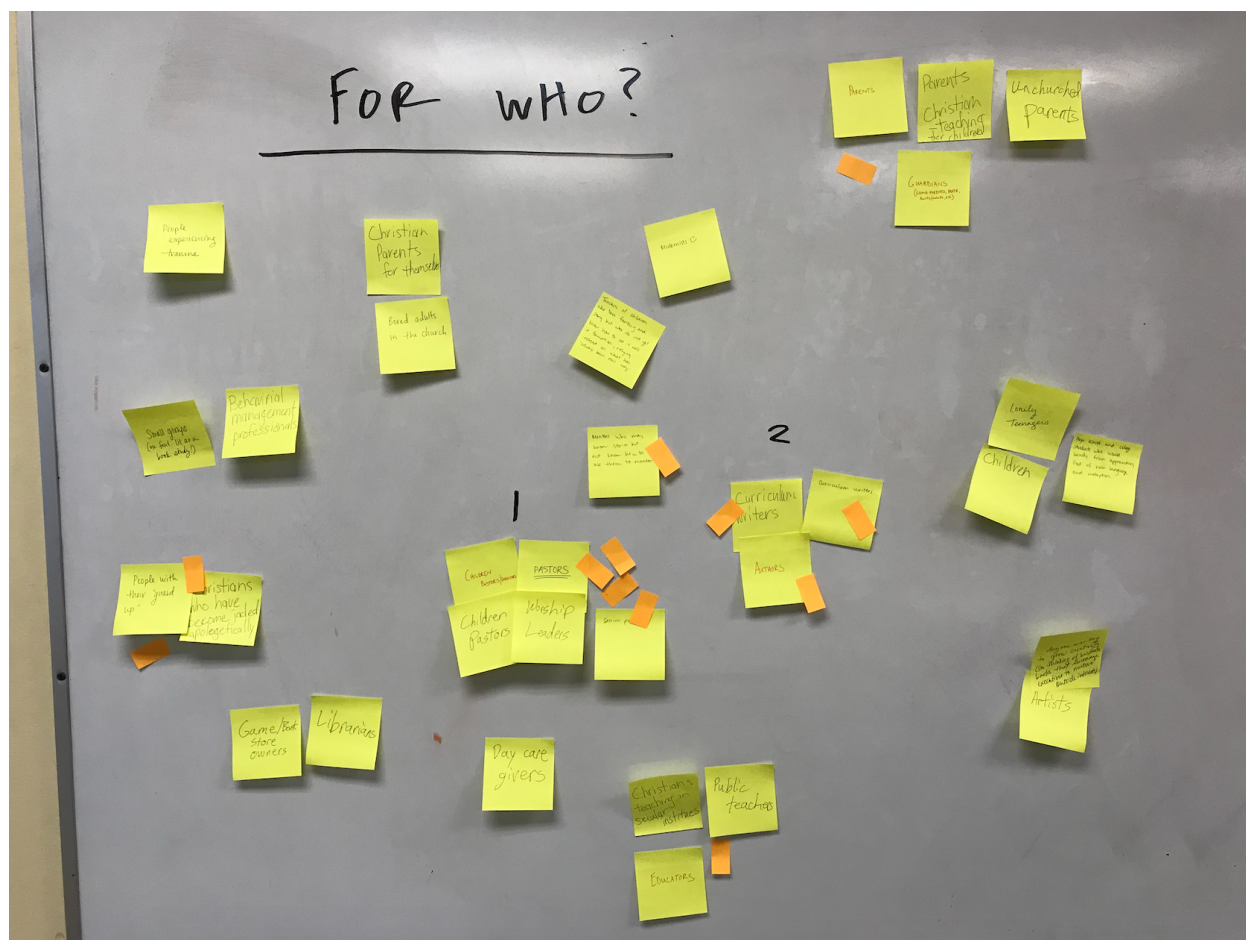
- The didactic nature of children's literature
- The potential for God to use fantasy fiction as a means of prevenient grace
- The pace advantage of written literature (versus film) for identifying with characters and exploring complex realities
- The importance of reading aloud to children on early childhood development and the power of conversations paired with reading aloud to children on faith formation
- The potential of fantasy fiction to be an aid for helping children with special needs explore their interior self and engage with others
- Digging into the theme of redemption in children's literature
- Tolkien's idea of subcreation

- L'Engle's use of Scripture in her fantasy novels
- Lewis' rich metaphors
- Directly interviewing children

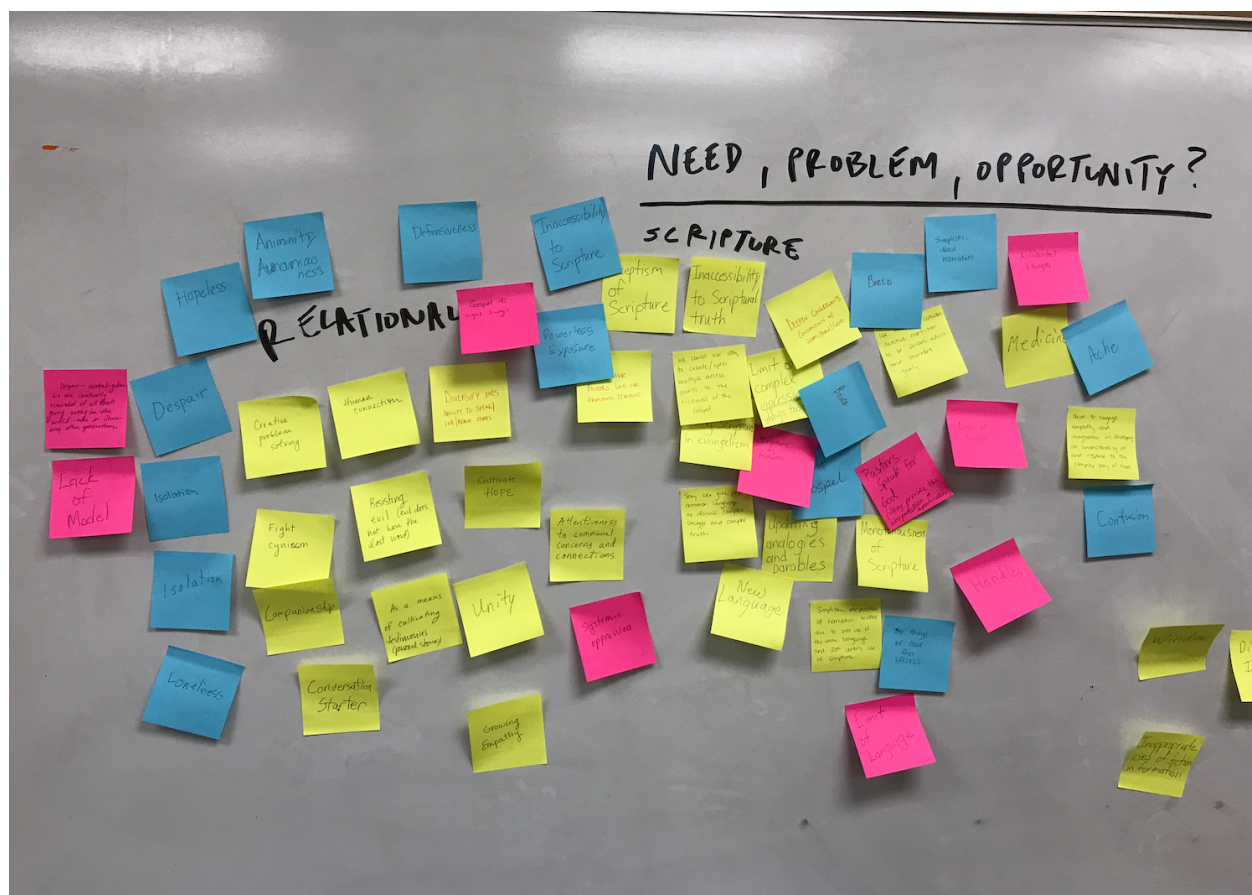
Additional next steps will include moving toward a project decision: a guide for teachers of children for utilizing children's literature as a tool for faith formation or a manuscript for an actual children's fantasy fiction novel? Perhaps both.

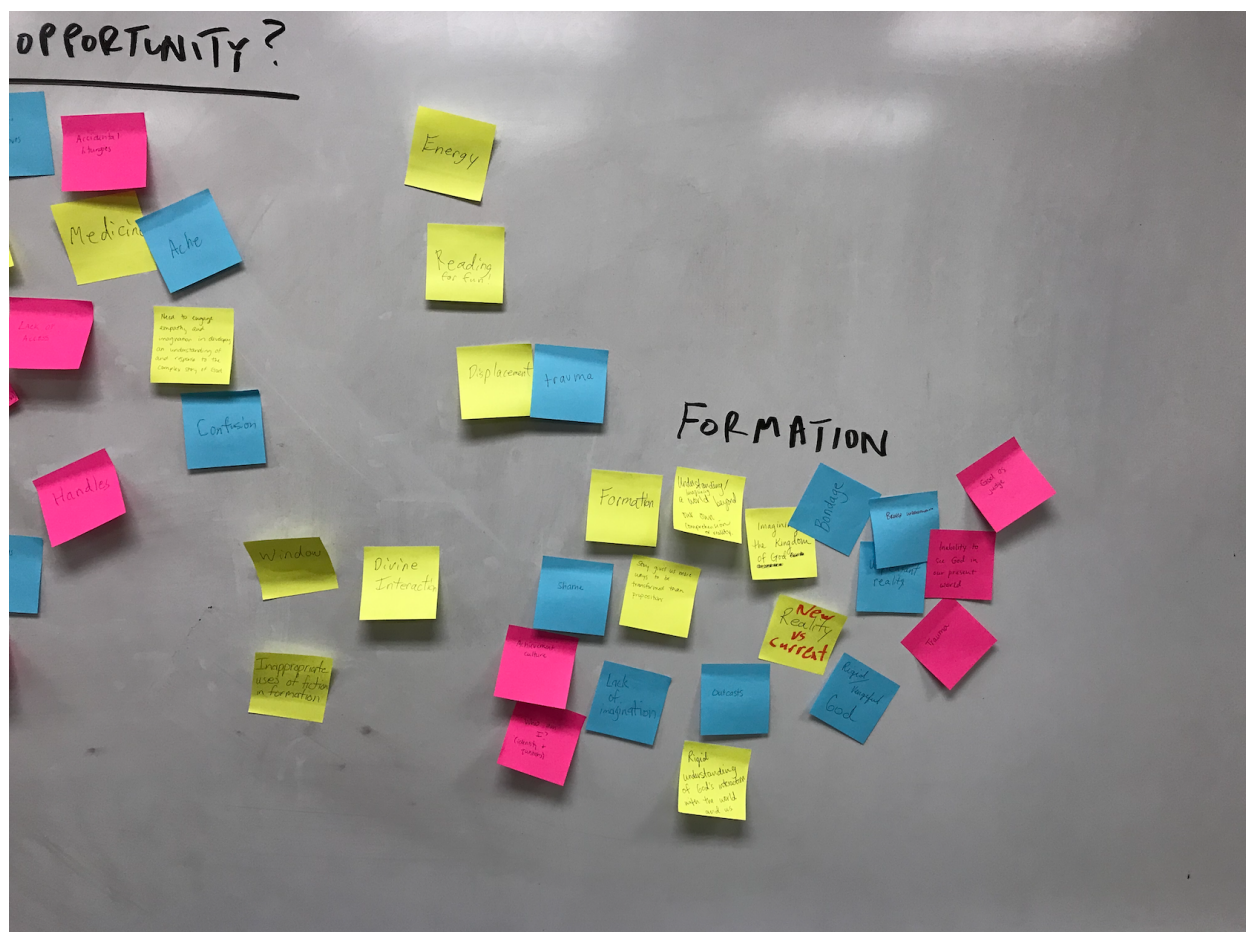
## Appendix A

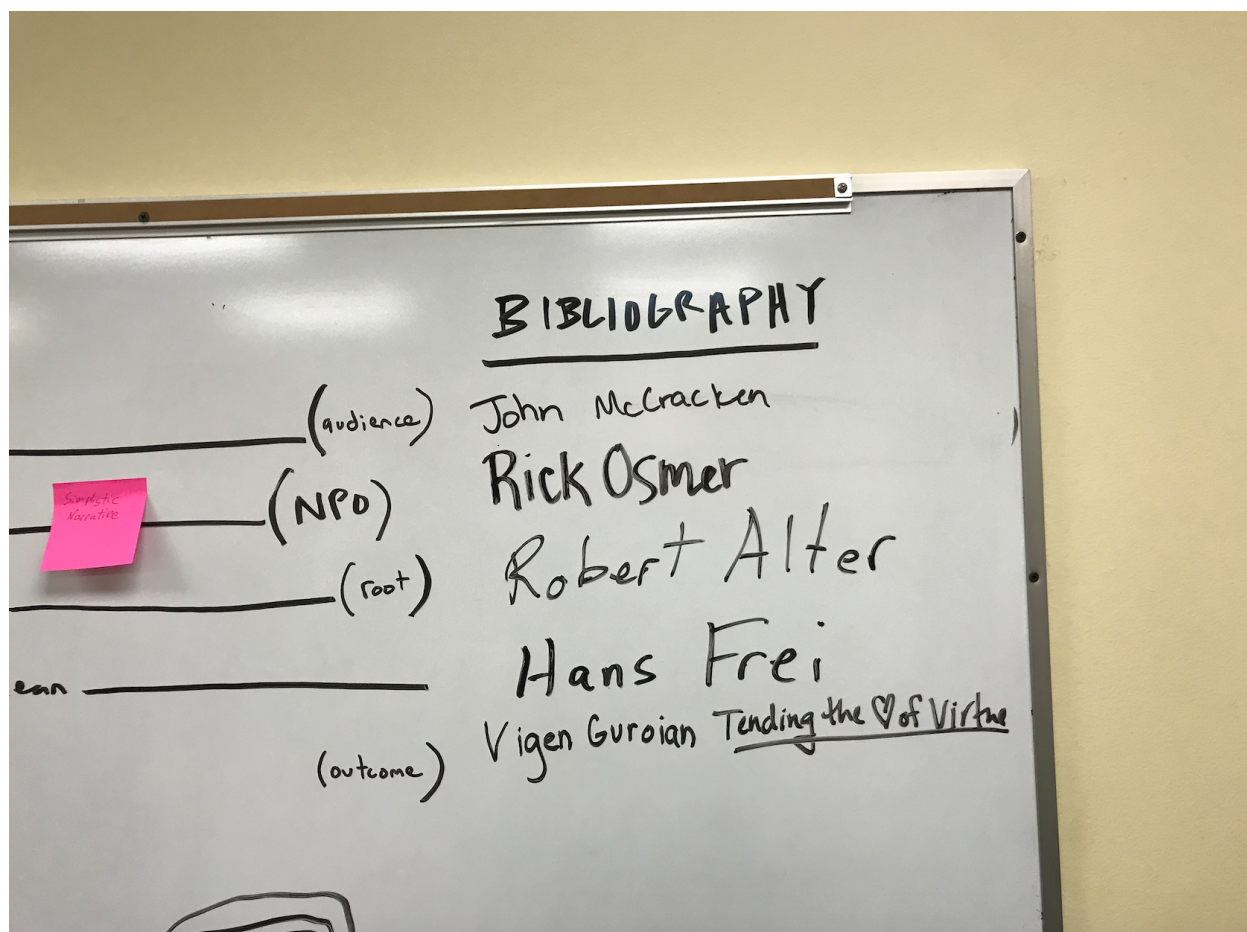
## Discovery Session Notes











## Appendix B

### Interview 1

#### **What do you love about fantasy fiction? What are the ingredients that make fantasy good?**

- Intellectual and emotional draw...share that with josie (“alive”)
- [Husband] never used to read fantasy fiction, that it was a waste of time, or lying
- Big picture oriented, navigate big questions, more significant questions, what is the nature of good/evil, what is a hero, redemption, sacrifice
- [Husband] and autism, emotional situations/rosetta stone for communicating complex emotions
- Geeking out, the fun part of it
- Fiction helps us explore complexity
- Good defeats evil with the unexpected, just by being good
- Postmodern truth (cosmically true, emotional true)
- Out of the trappings of our everyday world but help us explore it
- Makes mystery and emotions tangible
- Happy endings are not caught up in power, but restoration (home and wholeness)
- Coming back home with a different understanding
- Genuine uncertainty
- The world keeps getting bigger

#### **Is there something unique about books? Or should I be researching movies?**

- Why I won’t give up books...
- Pondering, savoring, more immersive



- On screen you can't get the emotional complexity
- More participation, dig deep into the characters
- Slower pace than movies (more pausing and more "underneath" exploration)
- The changes happen too fast in film, unrealistic

### **Could fantasy be an important tool for children and adults with autism?**

- Fan fiction (sub-creation)

### **How might fantasy fiction help us connect with Scripture or the Church?**

- Inter-play with Scripture or church
- Scripture is a description of something else
- "Scripture is chapter titles for the things that God has done"
- Reconnecting to the narratives in Scripture
- Platitudes/answers to questions
- We didn't get to ask the questions
- Give a story to the passage: "You lose your life and find it"
- *The Arm of the Starfish* (L'Engle): Do you help your betrayer?
- Many Waters is about Noah but we don't know it until chapter 7
- Prevenient grace (taking the feeling of fantasy and return to Scripture)
- The story we are telling afterward, didn't know what kind of story they were in, messy.
- When you can say of a character or story, "Me too!"
- You are pretty sure something giant is happening around you but you can only see something small
- Getting caught up in a story before you know and then looking back (just like grace)
- "Accidental liturgies" (wardrobes)

- Disarming Gives us access to complex ideas

**What kinds of conversations have emerged around fantasy with your daughter?**

- On the way to the zoo, the nature of evil, tracking the villains (what happened to them?  
How did they get that way? They were trying to get a need met.
- Who will you let be a part of your team?
- There are not perfect good and bad guys
- How God flips the world upside (love over power) Example: Wrinkle in Time
- What is pain? What will we do when we are in pain? Example: Narnia
- Frodo and change
- Smeagol as a character study. What happened?
- Fantasy gives permission
- There's gotta be danger/genuine risk
- Film gives answers too quickly

**What fantasy hasn't done?**

- Not many series with female characters and it's not about them being a girl (too shallow)
- Potter = a complementary team, everyone was needed
- One person and rings (what about a story where everyone is needed plus the conflict)
- Divergent = conflict among the good guys
- Redemption is essential, people need to die. Example: Fred Weasley
- Redemption without reductive, without being disrespectful to the very real darkness
- 

1on1 Interview 2

**Has fantasy fiction had an impact on your spiritual formation?**

- “Gave me a truth about the world that I didn’t believe”
- Helped me find the emotions
- A sentence I needed. I was the most depressed and *The Way of Kings* (Brandon Sanderson) help me realize my depression but also cope with it.
- Kaliden in prison and Wit’s story.
- “The Kaladin is dead” “The old Tim is dead.” Needed a new Tim for the next journey.
- Then Kaladin tells the story to Shallen.
- “I needed a sentence.”

**What might be unique about fantasy fiction and fairytale as literary genres, for developing a child's imagination for the theological? In other words, does fantasy/fairy tale have the potential to be a tool for Christian faith formation and, if so, what particularly is true about this genre/sub genre that makes faith formation a possibility?**

- “Fantasy fiction can tap into a truer reality than non-fiction” Example: demons, the spiritual
- “I am highly suspicious” More open to fictional conversation on spiritual warfare than a real conversations.
- “A side entrance.”
- “FF disarms me.”
- “[the story] has entered me.”
- I think Frank Peretti has helped me navigate “Wellsprings” better than their training (I’ve used the “vision and forms” and it has stretched my “imagination” = metaphors)
- Pairing FF with “facts.”
- Perhaps people “trust” the story.

- Story has the power to form and deform.
- Story vs facts have more emotional potency. “The journey that it takes you on. We are designed for journey.”

**How might research on children's literature and childhood development/faith formation help the local church?**

- Could create a brand new system (curriculum).
- “Just telling the Bible story doesn’t cut it.” FF could be the bridge between Bible and a child’s application.
- An alternative to other fiction shaping children.
- Danger is replacement of FF over Bible.
- Do you have any resource recommendations as it relates to children's literature and childhood development/faith formation?
- From your perspective, are there any unexplored areas of research related to children's literature and childhood development/faith formation?

**Special needs and trauma?**

- Some can’t handle the metaphor of “father”
- What about connecting dogs (affinity) with Scripture
- Helping connect with God on a personal level.

**Why did y'all took the book?**

- Easier to digest vs something telling you, also fun
- (same info, different vehicle)
- Max Lucado (stickers)
- “More memorable than Scripture”



### Interview 3

#### **Professor jumps right in...**

- OSU - Sharlette Huck (first degree)
- 1700s
- 2 truths = 1. Children will accept what they like 2. Didactic (something to take away)
- “If truth is there, God is there.”
- What is the big idea/most important, that’s where you’ll find that truth.
- Arlene’s Sardin (picture book), takes sacrifice
- Reader-response theory (transaction)
- It’s not a story until the two come together, book and reader creates the story
- Even if the author is not a Christian

#### **What drives your interest in children's literature?**

- Struggled as a reader in primary school. Hated school. The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.
- A real response = entering the world comprehension is not enough (head), must be heart
- Elementary teacher for 20 years, seeing the impact on children through literature (a way of children seeing themselves in a safe environment) Not just academics, but spiritual and social.
- Doctorate at OSU

#### **Why is reading aloud to children important for their development?**

- Reading and speaking are different patterns. Reading in utero, sets the stage (the cadence).
- Reading aloud = modeling, with passion and emotion - also makes a social connection, adult and children bring different things to the story and so the conversation is essential, start with natural responses to the story, then the Big Idea
- Reading aloud also, lets you stretch vocabulary (they hear new words in context vs vocab list)
- 1000 books read to children before they can begin to read themselves
- Important for Phonemic awareness
- And the relationship to the book

**Could reading aloud to children have an impact, not only on early childhood development, but also faith formation?**

- Yes, especially because of the conversation about the book
- Book: “Swimming” Leo leoni (the illustrator) says taking your unique talents for the good of the community

**What might be unique about fantasy fiction and fairytale as literary genres, for developing a child's imagination for the theological? In other words, does fantasy/fairy tale have the potential to be a tool for Christian faith formation and, if so, what particularly is true about this genre/sub genre that makes faith formation a possibility?**

- Especially with Western folk tales, because of Christianity, the goodness prevails
- Fantasy is folktale on steroids
- Max Lucado vs CS Lewis (opposite starting points)
- Kathrine Patterson (Bridge to Terabithia) was a Christian

**How might research on children's literature and childhood development/faith formation help the local church?**

- Children's Literature to introduce the Big Idea in Sunday School
- God gave us stories
- A second golden age of Children's literature
- Any children's book

**From your perspective, are there any unexplored areas of research related to children's literature and childhood development/faith formation?**

- "Nobody has done this"

**Do you have any resource recommendations as it relates to children's literature and childhood development/faith formation?**

- Conversation: Quin White at Taylor University
- Reach out to Kathern Patterson
- "Paul Writes a Letter" book, look up author
- Rudeen Sims Bishop: "Windows (another person), mirrors (seeing yourself in the book), sliding glass doors (entered in)"

## APPENDIX B—MILESTONE 2 NPO TOPIC EXPERTISE ESSAY

### Introduction to Biblical and Theological Foundation

In order to lay a Biblical and theological foundation for the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature, we must attempt to answer a seemingly impossible question: "How would the people of God in the Old Testament respond to the idea of using fictional stories to teach children about God, fictional stories that were written both with and without this intended outcome in mind?" The answer to this question appears to be out of reach for us because of cultural distance. Moses never ordered books on Amazon or took Isaac to story time at the neighborhood library. There was no publishing industry or even a genre called "children's literature." Furthermore, our modern, Western distinction between fact and fiction would probably have confused Moses and the people of God in the Old Testament. And yet, despite these differences, if we examine the Torah, we'll find that telling stories to children was a deeply embedded practice of the people of God.

We may also find that these stories were not as concerned about actual history as they were about shaping the listeners to live faithfully in their covenant with God. Additionally, if we fast forward to the New Testament, we see the storytelling tradition not only continuing with the early Christians through the use of the Old Testament Scriptures, but we also see teachers borrowing from pagan literature from the culture around them to tell the story of God. With this in mind, our original question seems less absurd and, perhaps, as we begin to answer it, we'll see that utilizing children's literature for faith formation is simply a fresh expression of an old and effective practice of the people of God.

## A Storyteller God

The Israelite practice of telling stories to children in order to ensure that future generations would have faith is found most explicitly in Deuteronomy 6. There we find not only a command (“repeat [the Shema] again and again to your children”),<sup>54</sup> but we are also given images of how these commands were shared generation to generation (“Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.”)<sup>55</sup>. Parents were to set aside specific times to tell these stories at home and to take advantage of the time on road trips to repeat them. All of this seems like standard educational practices employed by cultures ancient and contemporary, but what makes Moses’ vision for the people of God unique and wilder is that he calls for a total immersion in the stories. “Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house on your gates” (6:8-9)<sup>56</sup>. What Moses is imagining is a community that “wears” and “lives in” the story and stories of their faith so that they will not be forgotten in future generations..

So, then, we must conclude that the people of God in the Old Testament were story people, and the practice of telling stories to children was an essential command in the Torah. Deuteronomy 6 makes this clear and gives us word pictures of how this command was lived out. Yet this is not the only reference to generational storytelling in the Old Testament. There are multiple places marked by the following particular phrase, or something near it: “In the future your children will ask you, ‘What is the meaning of...’”<sup>57</sup> It seems God, or at least the writers of

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<sup>54</sup> Deut. 6:7 (NLT)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Deut. 6:8-9 (NLT)

<sup>57</sup> Deuteronomy 6:20; Exodus 12:26, 13:14, Joshua 4:21

the Old Testament, cue parents and grandparents with this phrase, marking the events and stories that were the ones in which they were to retell to their children.

This points to an even larger idea found in the Torah: The people of God were storytellers, because they believed that God was a storyteller. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt...” is how God introduces himself in Exodus 20:2 and many other places in the Old Testament. The God of the Israelites related to the people through story, namely two big stories: Creation and the Exodus. It was more than just the events themselves, but the ongoing retelling of these events through story, that shaped the people of God. But how did they understand these stories?

### Imaginative Remembering

Old Testament scholars land all over the map on the spectrum of the Bible as basically fact or entirely fiction, but most agree that the Bible is true in some sense. For some, the Bible is true because it is history, or contains some history. For others, the Bible is at least true in the sense that Jesus’ parables are true, using fiction to tell us a story about reality. John Goldengay argues that Scripture itself never sets out to settle the debate of what mixture of history and parable the Bible is. “When the Bible describes biblical narrative as inspired,” he says, “it’s point is that it therefore speaks beyond its original context (it speaks to us) and it is effective (it does things to us), not that it’s necessarily factually accurate at every point.”<sup>58</sup> The storytellers of the Old Testament, then, were not only, or perhaps even primarily, concerned about what had happened, but what was happening, what God wanted to say and do for the people of God in that particular moment and going forward. This dual purpose creates a dance.

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<sup>58</sup> John Goldengay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) 26

Walter Brueggemann refers to this fluid process as “imaginative remembering,” and it was an activity enacted by the storytellers of the Hebrew Scriptures for “telling and retelling in order to make faith possible for the next generation.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, the historical events of the Old Testament were seen as living traditions. In their remembering, the storytellers were oriented towards the future and not the past. This elevates both the older generations, as the storytellers, and the younger generation, as the story recipients, and it requires collaboration. “The remembering part is done in the intergenerational community,” says Brueggemann, “as parents tell and retell to children and grandchildren what is most prized in community lore.”<sup>60</sup> But again, the goal here was not simply the preservation of history or culture, but to make faithfulness to God a possibility for future generations. They were not building a library so much as shaping young people.

### Story Conversations

There is at least one more insight we can pull from Deuteronomy 6 and the imagery given in verses 4-9. The times and places of the command (home, road, bedtime, and morning) assume that these storytelling opportunities were not performative but participatory. The Shema was not simply to be repeated and the stories of Creation and Exodus not only told, but “talked about.”<sup>61</sup> Talking about these things during everyday activities ensured that the children would not only memorize the stories, but understand them. In this way, it is not simply the story that teaches, but it is the story being told, the exchange between adult and child, that does the work. What really

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<sup>59</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 9-11

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 9

sense of understanding. It means to stand under, to carry the weight of, to support.

<sup>61</sup> Deut. 6:7 (NLT)

matters, in other words, is the conversation. The didactic nature of these Old Testament stories, as in contemporary children's literature, is in the talk between storyteller and listener.

### Connecting the Dots

We see telling stories to children as a deeply embedded practice in the Old Testament, one rooted in the reality of a storytelling God, expressed through imaginative remembering and adult-child conversation. And when we leap to the New Testament, we find Jesus not only blessing children, but affirming their ability to grasp the Kingdom of God, rebuking those who would hinder young people from knowing him.<sup>62</sup> He goes as far as declaring that children have something to teach adults about the Kingdom of God.<sup>63</sup> Jesus, himself, as a child gets lost and spends three days talking with the religious leaders in the Temple following the Passover.<sup>64</sup> All of this points toward Jesus' high view of children and learning in the New Testament and the ongoing participation of children in the storytelling tradition we first find in the Old Testament. We may even see Jesus, or at least the writers of the New Testament, perpetuating the practice of imaginative remembering.

Many of the events of Jesus ministry told in the Gospels appear to be in sequence with major events in the Old Testament. One example is found in the Gospel of John, which begins with a retelling of the Creation poem, personified in Jesus. Luke arranges his Gospel in such a way that Jesus' baptism and desert temptation parallels Israel's Exodus and wilderness wanderings. It seems, then, that the Gospel writers, in the same way as the Old Testament writers, are more concerned with a practical, rather than strictly historical, retelling of the events

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<sup>62</sup> Mark 10:13-16

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 18:1-5

<sup>64</sup> Luke 2:41-52



of God so that the next generation might have faith. The Gospel of John, the “book of signs,” explicitly states this purpose: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*”<sup>65</sup>

One additional factor is found in the New Testament, at least. Not only do the writers and teachers borrow from the Old Testament in their process of imaginative remembering, they also borrow from neighboring cultures. The lyrical opening of the Gospel of John, while having traceable roots in the Jewish Scriptures and tradition,<sup>66</sup> the Greek word “logos” would definitely have appealed to the philosophical mind of the Hellenistic culture of John’s original audience. N.T. Wright explains, “Some spoke of the ‘word’ as a kind of principle of rationality, lying deep within the whole cosmos and within all human beings. Get in touch with this principle, they said, and your life will find its true meaning. Well, maybe, John is saying to them; but the Word isn’t an abstract principle, it’s a person. And I’m going to introduce you to him.”<sup>67</sup> The gospel writer, in other words, borrows an idea from the prevailing culture and uses it to tell the story of God.

In the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, the author records a story of Paul, preaching and teaching in Athens. He took to both the synagogues and street markets with the Gospel of Jesus, and knowing his audience well, Paul borrows from the pagan wisdom tradition of the locals, quoting an Athenian poet: “We are his offspring.”<sup>68</sup> Rather than outright declaring the Athenian poets and philosophers to be wrong, or ignoring their literature all

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<sup>65</sup> John 20:30-31

<sup>66</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 520-522

<sup>67</sup> Tom Wright, *John for Everyone* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 4-5

<sup>68</sup> Acts 17:28

together, the apostle retells their own stories in light of Jesus. He uses a vocabulary they can grasp and adapts the story of God to fit the audience before him. What we find here is a precedent for contextualizing the Gospel and for utilizing literature, any literature, to tell the story of God.

### Conclusion

In the deeply rooted practice of telling stories to children in the Torah, Deuteronomy's emphasis on adult-child conversations around the story of God, the Old Testament's tradition of imaginative remembering, and the practice of contextualizing the Gospel in the New Testament, we find a biblical and theological foundation for the faith formation possibilities found in utilizing children's literature to tell the story of God. Though the genre of children's literature and our current book culture would have been foreign to Moses and the gospel writers, we can assume that if they were alive in our times, they would be open, even eager, to borrow and create literature for children that would tell the good news of God to the emerging generation. In the golden age of children's literature, then, teachers of children would be amiss to not embrace the faith formation possibilities found in the picture and chapter books on the shelves of today's bookshops.

### Introduction to the History and Key Voices

The faith formation possibilities found in children's literature as a topic of research does not have a history of its own, rather, it is the recent site of a convergence of historical threads. In a way, it is as old as stories, first shared orally amongst adults and passed on to children, not specifically as stories for children, but as stories that should be remembered and, therefore, retold repeatedly to the next generation. These stories often took the form of a fable, offering a clear

moral, or a folktale, exploring something felt about the universal human condition.<sup>69</sup> And so from the beginning these stories, intentionally or unintentionally, had an element of instruction. It wasn't until these traditional tales were gathered and written down by collectors and scholars for the sake of cultural preservation and study, that genres like fairy tales and fantasy emerged, paving the way for the distinction of children's literature. It is from this history that many of our key voices told their tales and defended them.

In order to make the case that Children's Literature has value beyond cultural preservation, study, instruction, or even entertainment, we must also briefly examine the histories of childhood development theories and the faith formation of children. Much of what we know of how a child grows and matures is owed to the work of childhood development theorists and psychologists Jean Piaget, Erik H. Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, L.S. Vygotsky, and many others in the 20th century. To understand the faith formation of children we must take a snapshot of the history of both families and Christian education, paying special attention to work of John H. Westerhoff. The final thread that informs the overall history of our topic is the development of read-aloud theory and its contribution to children's literature and education. But first, how did we get Children's Literature?

### Stories for Children

The genre of Children's Literature emerged out of what is referred to as traditional literature, the "myths, epics, legends, tall tales, fables, and folktales that originated in oral storytelling and have been passed down from one generation to the next."<sup>70</sup> These stories

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<sup>69</sup> Rebecca Lukens, *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*, (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 1999), 24

<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Horning, *From Cover to Cover* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 46

circulated in their oral form until scholars collected and published them, scholars like Jacob Ludwig Karl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm in the early 19th century, affectionately known as the Brothers Grimm. Children's Literature, then, follows the path of all literature. During the Romantic period of the late 18th century, writers and poets wrote with the beliefs that children were innocent and childhood, sacred.<sup>71</sup> Along with a new appreciation for imagination, these romantic ideals characterized writers for children, like George MacDonald, who's fantasy influenced our key voices, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who we will explore later. The growth of Children's Literature was accelerated by major historical developments like the invention of the printing press in the 15th century and the expansion of public schooling in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Yet, it wasn't until after the 1970s that Children's Literature formally became a subject of study in higher education.<sup>72</sup>

### Child Development

The history of our topic is indebted to the work of Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, whose research advanced the topic of childhood development in the mid-1900s. Though not without criticism, the influence of his theories has shaped education, children's literature, and even Christian childhood faith formation. "Piaget's main contribution to our understanding of cognitive development was the recognition of the child as a meaning maker."<sup>73</sup> Because hearing stories and storytelling are a significant way of making meaning, Piaget's research has helped

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<sup>71</sup> Jack Zipes, Lissa Paul, and Lynne Vallone, *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), xxviii

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii

<sup>73</sup> Barbara Kiefer and Cynthia Tyson, *Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature: A Brief Guide* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 34

educators and teachers of children see the significant contribution children's literature can have on identity formation.

The work of psychologist Erik Erikson, who mapped out emotional and social development stages, has helped guide educators to create or select developmentally appropriate books for children of all ages. Erikson believed that each development stage “centers around the individual's meeting a particular goal or concern.”<sup>74</sup> Children's literature, then, can be a companion to the child along these pathways of change and growth. This process of becoming, is what Abraham Maslow envisioned in his theory of “hierarchy of needs,” as he believed life was a journey that begins in childhood and moves toward self-actualization.<sup>75</sup> Certainly educators of children can utilize books to help children, not only imagine a life of fulfillment, but to meet their needs of psychological health, safety, love and belonging, and esteem along the way. These researchers and many more have helped paved the way for our conversation about faith formation and children's literature.

### Faith Formation of Children

To track the history of the faith formation of children, we must examine how we got here, both in terms of family and Christian education. The concept of “family” varies culturally, not only historically, but no matter what meaning we give it, family will have something to do with kinship (spouses, mothers, fathers, siblings, etc.) and households (structures of living in groups). Ancient households could include not only extended family, but also servants, slaves, and livestock, numbering in the size of 50-100 people.<sup>76</sup> This would have been typical of kin groups

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>76</sup> Diana Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012),

in the Old Testament, with the addition of widows and orphans.<sup>77</sup> Ancient households and kinship were deeply communal versus individualistic, and so the faith formation of children was not thought of separately, but wrapped up in the formation of the entire group.

The Western idea of the nuclear family, a social unit consisting of two married partners and their children, emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries in colonial North America, largely for economic reasons.<sup>78</sup> While many cultures continued to embrace, and still do, a household structure that includes extended family, the nuclear family was cemented during the industrial revolution of the 19th century. It is into this environment that we see the development of modern Christian education. The faith formation of children, once the responsibility of the whole kin group and community, was largely transferred to parents, and finally shared with the local church, as economic pressure moved stay-at-home caregivers to join the workforce. Outsourcing the education of children to public schools became a model for how parents would do the same for the spiritual development of their kids within the local church.

It is into this backdrop that theories of child faith formation evolved. Christian educators modeled their catechism after the pedagogy and theories found in the public school system, and for good reason. Churches had much to learn from childhood development theories and educational practices. However this was cause for alarm for John H. Westerhoff. In his classic book on Christian education, *Will our Children Have Faith?*, Westerhoff critiques the trend of churches mimicking schools, concerned that the emphasis was too much on the child's mind and not their whole being. He wanted to call Christian educators back to the foundational belief that "the church teaches most significantly through nurture in a worshiping, witnessing

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<sup>77</sup> Goldengay, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 76

<sup>78</sup> Garland, *Family Ministry*, 30

community of faith.”<sup>79</sup> What the church does best, he argued, was not offering information, but transformation. And how did Westerhoff imagine this process for children? Children are formed through hearing, telling, and internalizing the story of God (93). And it is in the identity-shaping community that Westerhoff believes they will grow and mature in a process from experienced faith to affiliative faith, to searching faith, and finally, owned faith. Westerhoff’s view of the formation of children, that we should capture their hearts (“affections”) as well as their minds, aligns with the proponents of children’s literature as a vehicle for shaping the interior lives of children.<sup>80</sup> And yet, Westerhoff never offers children’s literature as a means for faith formation.

Perhaps Westerhoff, in dismissing modern Christian education’s tendency towards true-false propositions and overemphasis on “facts,” caused him to lose access to the library of imaginative literature available in public education. Or perhaps, Westerhoff was stuck in modernity himself, viewing the Bible in the same propositional way. That the story of the Bible is true in a historical way, is what makes it true for Westerhoff. He misses that story itself, fact or fiction, has the elements of formation and, therefore, should not be ignored because it is not a “true” story. A story need not be true to tell the truth, and fiction shapes us.

Absolute truth, orthodoxy, right thinking - these have been the aims of Christian education and the reasons why teachers of children have underappreciated or not realized the faith formation possibilities found in children’s literature. Westerhoff’s book was first published just a little over a decade after Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* won the Newbery Medal, the highest award in children’s literature, but not before libraries, schools, and conservative Sunday

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<sup>79</sup> John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 4

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 35

School teachers stopped banning and censoring it.<sup>81</sup> A skepticism of imagination, distrust of the science community, and an avoidance of anything “secular” caused evangelical Christians of her day to be critical of L’Engle’s children’s literature. This is the backdrop of Westerhoff’s vision for children’s education, so it is no wonder we don’t see him advocating for fiction as faith formation. But that is all beginning to change, in part, because of the resurgence of the read-aloud.

### The Read-Aloud

One final bit of somewhat recent history that contributes to our topic is the growing body of research on the benefits of reading aloud to children. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, written by Jim Trelease and first published in 1982, has sold over a million copies and sparked a revival of reading aloud to children at home and in the classroom. In later revisions of the book, Trelease shares this statement from 1985 Commission on Reading: “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children,”<sup>82</sup> But reading aloud to children does more than simply make readers out of children and promote literacy, it is one of the surest ways of developing a healthy and lasting relationship between adult and child and it will, in nearly every developmental area, help them thrive in adulthood.<sup>83</sup> It is not simply the story that shapes the child, though the story is important, it is the conversation about the story that is most important. Reading aloud to children does the kind of heart development that Westerhoff states is central to a Christian education. In fact, reading aloud *fiction*, Jim Trelease says, is the most effective:

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<sup>81</sup> Sarah Arthur, *A Light So Lovely: The Spiritual Legacy of Madeleine L’Engle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 52

<sup>82</sup> Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 4

<sup>83</sup> Sarah Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 20



“So how do we educate the heart? There are really only two ways: life experience and stories of life experience, which is called literature...Literature is considered an important medium because it brings us closest to the human heart. And of the two forms of literature (fiction and nonfiction), the one that brings us closest to the meaning of life is fiction.”<sup>84</sup>

That children’s literature, and especially reading children’s literature aloud to children, shapes children, is the surest indicator that Christian teachers of children need to seize the faith formation possibilities. And if we want to capture the hearts of our kids, fiction might be our best shot. “If you want a child to know the truth, tell him the truth. If you want a child to love the truth, tell him a story,” Sarah Mackenzie quotes Andrew Peterson in her book *The Read Aloud Family*.<sup>85</sup>

#### Topic History Conclusion

The historical threads of storytelling, children’s literature, childhood development theories, Christian education, and the read-aloud revival, together contribute to the history of the faith formation possibilities found in books for kids. The people and events that make up this history offer clues to why churches have historically resisted children’s literature as a viable vehicle for faith formation, but also make a compelling case for embracing it. Now we will turn to key voices that have, along the way, sought to defend fairy tales and imagination, utilizing fiction not only for childhood development, but to even tell, or point toward, the Story of God.

#### Key Voice: Rudine Sims Bishop

In a 1990 essay titled “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita of Education at The Ohio State University, describes the

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<sup>84</sup> Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 45

<sup>85</sup> Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family*, 51

developmental power of children's literature. She offers three images to explain how books are not mere entertainment, but stories that transform. Sometimes a book is a mirror in that through the narrative or characters we can see catch of glimpse of ourself. They are a "means of self-affirmation" and we read in order to not feel alone, for identity, or perhaps even to discover something new about ourselves yet revealed or unleashed.<sup>86</sup> A child who has discovered a mirror in a book might start embodying and playacting a favorite character or may simply walk away after reading the story with a fresh confidence in their own personality, culture, or ethnicity.

Beyond a mirror, a book may also become a window. Rather than reflecting a child's own lived experience or inner world, a book that is a window shows her the experience of another. As a window, children's literature can expand the imagination of a child by opening his mind up to seeing a world that is different than his own. "Did you know that..." is the reflective phrase of a child who has experienced a window through children's literature.

Books that are really effective windows can also become sliding glass doors. "Readers have only to walk through in imagination to become a part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author."<sup>87</sup> The difference of outcome is, a window gives you perspective while a sliding glass door grants you empathy. There is an emotional connection that pulls the reader into the story. These worlds can be real or fantasy, but the point is that they show the reader something new, invites them in, sends them home forever changed.

That books can be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors points to the faith formation possibilities of children's literature. As a mirror, the book has the potential to reflect the image of

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<sup>86</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Collected Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1990), <https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

God in the reader. As a window, the book can answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” And as a sliding glass door, the book can invite the reader into the story of God and reveal their role in the grand narrative.

#### Key Voices of the 20th Century: Lewis, Tolkien, and L’Engle

On the journey of uncovering the faith formation possibilities found in children’s literature, one’s research would be amiss not to consider the great 20th century Christian fantasy writers, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. These friends and collaborators are not alone in their literary contribution as Christians who wrote fiction, but the reach of their works is vast and ongoing. And, of particular interest to my question of faith formation through children’s literature, they have both, separately, written in defense of fairy tales. One would also do well to ponder the literary impact of Madeleine L’Engle, whose stories have led many wandering souls to truth through fiction. She, like Lewis and Tolkien, was often called on to debate the validity of her genre. Perhaps their arguments might help us make the case for the faith formation possibilities in children’s literature in the 21st century.

“I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say,” exclaimed Lewis in his similarly titled essay, *Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said*, originally published in *The New York Times* Children’s Book section in 1956.<sup>88</sup> But what was it exactly that Lewis had to say? Or to put it more aptly, what story was Lewis trying to tell? A clue is found in his reflection:

“I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood...But supposing that by casting all these things into an

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<sup>88</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1966), 37

imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency?”<sup>89</sup>

Lewis wanted to communicate what Sunday school and stained-glass windows attempted to communicate to him: the Story of God, and concluded that the best form for that was children’s literature. What he helps us imagine here is profoundly practical, a new kind of Sunday school curriculum, a catechism of fictional stories, a teacher carrying picture books and fairy tales. But what makes fantasy the best vehicle for the most fantastic Story?

Lewis takes us on a journey to answer this question. In another write-up, most often recognized as *On Stories* from *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* in 1947, but originally titled, *The Kappa Element in Fiction*, he draws our attention to the “hidden” element (the meaning of “kappa”) found in fairy tales and fantasy.<sup>90</sup> This hidden element is in part the story’s “peripeteia” or moment of surprise. But it’s not the act of being surprised that the reader seeks, Lewis says, its the “surprisingness,” the quality of the surprise.<sup>91</sup> To better understand this hidden element of children’s literature we must look to Tolkien.

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien asserts that the true fairy-story is a “*eucatastrophic* tale,” meaning that it not merely gives the reader the happy ending, but “the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn.’”<sup>92</sup> Joy is what the fairy-tale can say best. Joy is the hidden element. Joy is the curriculum of the Sunday school teacher. But this “sudden miraculous grace” is not a shallow joy, says Tolkien. It does not deny the existence of *dyscotastrophe*, of

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., viii

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>92</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988) 68

sorrow and failure.” Rather, it rejects “universal final defeat.”<sup>93</sup> Madeleine L’Engle is helpful on this point, as well, who wrote in *Walking on Water*: “Art is an affirmation of life, a rebuttal of death.”<sup>94</sup> This is why Tolkien calls the *eucatastrophic* tale “evangelium.”<sup>95</sup> It is gospel, or at the very least, it points to the Gospel. Children’s literature that contains *eucatastrophe*, can tell the story of God or be used to tell the story of God.

#### Key Voice: Adam Gitwitz

In a 2016 essay entitled “What Makes a Children’s Book Good?” New York Times bestselling author of “A Tale Dark and Grimm,” “In a Glass Grimmly,” and “The Grimm Conclusion,” Adam Gitwitz, attempts to find his own answer to Lewis’ question of the hidden element found in children’s literature, though he looks for it by jumping into the timeless debate of what makes a book for kids “good.” Gitwitz organizes the conversation into two camps: those who take a “content-oriented” approach to the question and those who take a “results-oriented” approach. Aware of Lewis’ contribution to the discourse, Gitwitz locates him in the “results-oriented” camp, citing Lewis’ insistence that “a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story. The good ones last.”<sup>96</sup> Perhaps, Tolkien put it even better: “[Children’s] books like their clothes should allow for growth, and their books at any rate should encourage it.”<sup>97</sup> What makes a book for kids good to Lewis and Tolkien? That the story is a shirt that always fits, that they can put back on from time to time, wearing it in and through their

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.,69

<sup>94</sup> Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2001), 186

<sup>95</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 69

<sup>96</sup> Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 24

<sup>97</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 46

adulthood. This, Gidwitz says, is writing children's stories with an outcome in the mind. "Good," for these voices, means lasting. In his attempt to answer the question for himself, it is not surprising that Gidwitz references Lewis.

Like Lewis, Gidwitz's books have been widely read and loved by children and adults alike, they each borrowed from other epics for their own stories, and similarly both authors have had to defend fairy tales from literary critics, parents, and teachers of children along the way. In a 2012 article in The Wallstreet Journal's Speakeasy blog, Gidwitz lays out his treatise in defense of fairy tales, retelling the story of a canceled visit to an elementary school where he was scheduled to read excerpts from his reimagined version of Grimm's fairy tales. Resistance to Grimm's fairy tales, in their original and remade versions, is not new, nor is the universal love for them by children, says Gidwitz. But why are kids still interested in fairy tales? The answer to this question might help Gidwitz answer the first, of what makes a children's book good.

That curious children are enthralled by the gruesomeness of the stories, is the first appeal to fairy tales that Gidwitz identifies, not likely appeasing his censors. That they know the stories are exaggerated or made up is the second reason kids are still drawn to fairy tales, he says, adding that this is also the factor that makes kids not afraid of Grimm (a very good rebuttal to those who reject the merits of fairy tales based on his first reason). And finally, Gidwitz shares the third reason why these tales still capture the attention of their readers: "The land of the fairy tale is not the external world. It is, rather, the internal one."<sup>98</sup> Gidwitz, here, sounds a lot like acclaimed author and psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, that what makes fairy tales unique as a genre is that

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<sup>98</sup> Adam Gidwitz, "In Defense of Real Fairy Tales", *Speakeasy: The Wall Street Journal*, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/10/14/the-forest-beckons-the-magic-of-real-fairy-tales/>

“in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, [fairy tales] start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being.”<sup>99</sup>

What Bettelheim and Gidwitz’s are saying, and for that matter Sims Bishop, is that these old and bloody tales are a fresh and clear mirror to the interior life of the reader. They show the child another world, inside themselves. But not just a mirror, also a window and sliding glass door, for “fairy tales share the archetypal structure of every story of growth.”<sup>100</sup> With a fairy tale, a child might learn something about themselves, they might ponder the situation of another, and they might go on a journey to return home forever changed. What makes a children’s book good? Here might lie Gidwitz’s answer. But before we draw a final conclusion, let us revisit once more J.R.R. Tolkien.

Gidwitz’s insistence that fairy tales are all essentially different versions of one universal story template, fits Tolkien’s idea of sub-creation, “his conviction that human creativity is a reflection of the Divine.”<sup>101</sup> It is in the poem *Mythopoeia* that we are introduced to humanity as sub-creators, or “little makers,”<sup>102</sup> written in part as a recollection of the legendary conversation he and Hugo Dyson had with C.S. Lewis,<sup>103</sup> the conversation that led to Lewis’ conversion to Christianity, which he came to believe to be a “true myth.”<sup>104</sup> Not only is Christianity a true myth

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<sup>99</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 6

<sup>100</sup> Adam Gidwitz, “In Defense of Real Fairy Tales,” *The Wall Street Journal*

<sup>101</sup> Diana Glyer, *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings* (Kent, Ohio: Black Squirrel Books, 2016), 130

<sup>102</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 89

<sup>103</sup> Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 188

<sup>104</sup> Diana Glyer, *Bandersnatch*, 16

to Tolkien, it validates myth-making. “Fantasy,” he says, “remains a human right, we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, our creations mimic the Creator, and much more profound than telling us more about ourselves, our own stories tell us about God. Gitwitz’s idea that fairy tales all follow one archetype, combined with Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation, not only helps us answer the question of what makes a kid’s book good, it leads us to consider that perhaps the faith formation possibilities found in children’s literature is that they are all signs pointing toward the one “Great Eucatastrophe,” the final joyous turn.<sup>106</sup>

What makes a children’s book good, concludes Gitwitz, is the response a child has to it. You’ll know it when they clutch the book to their chest upon completion, the first or forth time. They embrace the story, he says, “because those books help them find meaning in life, be it moral, psychological, or ineffable.”<sup>107</sup> Not entertainment, not escape, but joy is ultimate indicator of a good book. The good book is the one that leaves a mark. It turns out Lewis’ metaphor of a wardrobe in his beloved Narnia series, captures the faith formation possibilities in children’s literature. The books themselves are magical wardrobes, transporting the child through their imagination to another world and back. And when they arrive they are different, just like the Pevensie children who tumble back through the wardrobe after their adventures. “Kids will like a book with a great story. But they will only love a book that makes them see the world in a new

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<sup>105</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 56

<sup>106</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 73

<sup>107</sup> Adam Gitwitz, “What Makes a Children’s Book Good?,” *Cultural Comment*, *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-goosebumps-conundrum-what-makes-a-childrens-book-good>



way,” says Gidwitz.<sup>108</sup> The magic of Narnia is not Narnia itself, it is that Narnia transforms London.

#### Synthesis: Agreement or Consensus

In my key voices research, I was surprised to find Adam Gidwitz, an award-winning, contemporary writer of fairy tales for children, quoting so many of the Christian key voices I looked at or considered for study (C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, and G.K. Chesterton), and because of that, it was easy to connect the dots. Additionally, it seemed that most of my key voices faced the same battle of defending their art. Therefore, each had to articulate their reasons for appreciating and creating children’s fiction. There is a consensus among the voices appealing for myth, fantasy, fairy tale, and fiction. Children’s literature is worth reading by kids and adults alike because good books for kids are windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. They show us who we are and who our neighbor is. They take us on a journey of transformation. Through the joyous turn, good books for kids even have the potential to introduce the reader to the Story of God.

#### Synthesis: Ongoing Tensions, Disagreements, or Pressure

Perhaps some of tension that remains in my topic centers around the question of, “What makes a children’s book good?” Although, there is consensus among my key voices, ask any librarian in the country and you’ll find out that the book they’d recommend to a child is not always the same as the latest bestselling, popular children’s story kids actually pick up. Who decides which books are the good ones? The children themselves? Their parents? Perhaps, teachers, authors, or publishers? Do kids like books that aren’t good for them? These questions are lingering after my research.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

### Gaps, Missteps, and Limitations in Literature

One major gap in my research is the growing shelf of graphic novels being passed around by kids today and pushed by publishers. Often dismissed by old school teachers and penalized in reading progress programs, graphic novels are hitting the scene in droves. What is gained with the visual dimension? What is lost? Is there a key distinction between comic book and graphic novel? Should graphic novels replace, or simply diversify text-only chapter books? What about children's picture books? Do they deserve special attention in my research? Do chapter books, graphic novels, and picture books all have the same faith formation potential or is there a preferred medium. These questions and more are blind spots in my research.

One misstep in my research is related to the work of Rudine Sims Bishop. Her metaphors of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors arose out of her work on multiculturalism in children's literature, which I largely ignore in my paper. Representation matters in books, both for validation for those who can look at the book as a mirror and for growing empathy for those who read it as a mirror. Bishop's work can be applied to my topic generally, but I'd like to further explore how her lens of multiculturalism can be specifically applied to my study.

One limitation I faced in my research was finding sources that clearly articulated why churches and teachers of children have underappreciated or not recognized the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature. Most of my examples were implied or simply anecdotal.

Additionally, I would love to weave in the seminal work of Bruno Bettelheim (*The Uses of Enchantment*) and Joseph Campbell (*The Power of Myth*). Their important contributions to the conversation have influenced my thinking and would contribute to the consensus and synthesis of the key voices, but I simply ran out of time in my research.



## APPENDIX C—MILESTONE 3 DESIGN WORKSHOP REPORT

### NPO Statement

Teachers of children<sup>109</sup> have underappreciated<sup>110</sup> or not recognized the faith formation possibilities<sup>111</sup> found in children's literature.<sup>112</sup>

### NPO Scope and Constraints

The scope of my research extends into the areas of children's literature, childhood development, and faith formation, with special attention to the importance of reading aloud to children, which makes faith conversations possible. It includes a dive into the essays of Christian fantasy writers, defending the use of fantasy and fairy tale. It explores the multicultural dimension of children's literature and seeks to answer the question of "What makes a children's book good?"

My research and project will be limited to the boundaries of early childhood through adolescence, including picture books, middle grade chapter books, some graphic novels, and teen fiction. While including a range of genres within fiction, it will give special attention to fantasy, due to its potential for engaging the imagination, a key component for faith formation, but will exclude children's non-fiction, comic books, audiobooks, and film adaptations.

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<sup>109</sup> School teachers, parents, pastors, authors, but especially churches.

<sup>110</sup> Many have recognized that part of the magic of a fairy tale is its ability, through the creation of other worlds, to help children navigate their own inner worlds. But there is another use of enchantment. Fairy tales are myths that invite us into what Tolkien calls "True Myth."

<sup>111</sup> Made possible not simply because of the content of the story but because of the conversation about the story between the adult and child

<sup>112</sup> Especially fantasy and fairy tale

### NPO Context

The ministry context of my NPO is primarily churches and Christian universities. My hunch is, churches more than any other context, have underappreciated or not recognized the potential of children's literature as a tool for faith formation, though my research will be useful for any teachers of children, including parents, mentors, school teachers, homeschool cohorts, and authors who, while utilizing children's literature, may not know it's full potential. Christian universities may find my research helpful in training educators and pastors who will have a future in teaching children. My research will be of benefit to any denomination or church size, though perhaps traditions that emphasize spiritual formation or have formal catechism, will be most interested. Churches in communities with higher poverty rates and lower academic ratings, might find an overlap between my research and their efforts to increase the literacy rate in their local schools.

### Root Causes

Why has children's literature been overlooked as a tool for spiritual formation? Potential root causes of my NPO include the church's preference for propositional over narrative truth, attitudes of *sola Scriptura* in the discipleship of children, and suspicion of fiction as a viable means of grace, specifically children's literature that is not overtly "Christian" in nature and message. Additional potential root causes include a lack of access to good children's literature in some communities, the absence of adults reading aloud to kids, or the lack of education to equip adults to have the confidence in leading God conversations with children while using children's literature as a tool. These possible root causes have been confirmed by much of my research along with an additional root cause that has emerged from the design workshop: teachers of

children lack the Biblical and theological acumen to bounce back and forth from children's literature to God conversations.

Why is children's literature as a tool for spiritual formation a need and opportunity for kids and adults alike? Children's literature, specifically fantasy, has the ability to grant access to the complex and mysterious truths of Christianity, grow empathy and emotional intelligence, and invigorate stale faith that is struggling to connect with Scripture.

### Three Big Ideas

The three big ideas that emerged from my design workshop are: 1. A children's museum-like book immersion experience, 2. A thorough, informative textbook with more accessible resources like a universal bookmark guide, and 3. A children's ministry curriculum designed with kid's books for each lesson.

### Definition of "Done"

To deliver an accessible, imaginative, and sacramental resource that facilitates God conversations between adults and children through the use of children's literature.

### 3 Napkin Pitches

*Big Idea 1:* An interactive, children's museum-like kid's book walk-through experience.

- *Audience:* This event is intended for adults (parents, mentors, teachers, etc.) and children together.
- *NPO:* As a book is brought to life, storyteller "tour guides" also facilitate a God conversation that models the faith formation possibilities of children's literature.
- *Benefit:* Children benefit from an imaginative reading experience and adults receive indirect training in leading faith formation conversations using children's literature.

- *Approach*: Combining a play experience with children's literature is not completely new, but adding the element of faith formation is.
- *Risks*: Potential copyright issues. Depends heavily on set design and the quality of storytellers.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test*: A memorable event that models utilizing children's literature for faith formation will create momentum for adult-child God conversations.
- *Benchmarks of success*: That a reaction from a child demonstrates a discovery about God, that an adult starts using children's literature for faith formation following the event.
- *Other Approaches*: Children's literature author and illustrator Oliver Jeffers has brought to life museum-like experiences of his books, but not for faith formation purposes.

*Big Idea 2*: A thorough, informative book with more accessible companion resources like a universal bookmark guide.

- *Audience*: Students, educators, pastors, or parents. The main resource can be used for college courses as a textbook or anyone wanting to know the research behind the practice of utilizing children's literature for faith formation. The supplemental resources can be used by any adult with or without the main component textbook.
- *NPO*: The opportunity is to make a compelling argument or offer a simple tool to educators who have not known or underappreciated the faith formation possibilities in children's literature.
- *Benefit*: Those who want to fully embrace the faith formation possibilities of children's literature will have access to the sharable research. Those who want a quick guide will have a tool for facilitating conversations immediately and easily.

- *Approach:* The approach is getting a textbook and/or companion resources into the hands of educators of children that is underexplored and unlike any tool I'm aware of.
- *Risks:* Will the simple companion tools truly be universal (Can you pick up any book and use the bookmark guide)? Will anyone actually read the textbook?
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* A larger informational resource and a series of companion guides and tools with varying amounts of energy and time investment will create both an easy entry point for some and deep well of research for others.
- *Benchmarks of success:* Professors assigning this textbook, children's ministry teams reading it together, adults and child testimonies from companion tools.
- *Other Approaches:* Sara Mackenzie's *Read-Aloud Revival* book and podcast are the closest thing I know of to this idea.

*Big Idea 3:* A children's ministry curriculum designed using kid's books for each lesson.

- *Audience:* Children's ministry pastors, Sunday school teachers, possibly even VBS and kids' camp directors, parents.
- *NPO:* The opportunity is to provide a resource that children's ministries can immediately use that will engage children in the stories of the Bible using children's literature.
- *Benefit:* The content is already created for utilizing children's literature for faith formation, a volunteer must simply follow the lesson plans.
- *Approach:* The approach is creating a children's ministry curriculum scope and sequence that uses children's literature to help tell the story of God.
- *Risks:* The children's book distracts from or redirects the intended lesson, some volunteers may not like the idea of using children's literature in a Sunday School lesson.



- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* Through a Sunday School curriculum that utilizes children's literature, children will better connect to the stories and themes of the Bible.
- *Benchmarks of success:* Testimonies of children excited to learn about God and volunteers enthusiastic about the content.
- *Other Approaches:* I only know of a former volunteer in our children's ministry who did this on his own.

#### Design Workshop Stakeholders

1. Worship arts director with experience designing at-home liturgies for families
2. Children's ministry director and founder of a nonprofit centered on transforming the community through play
3. Graphic artist and a read-aloud parent
4. Honor's College professor with expertise in spiritual formation
5. Outreach pastor that leads a mentoring programing at a local elementary school

#### One-on-One Interviews

1. Follow-Up from design workshop: Graphic artist and a read-aloud parent
2. Additional: Young adults pastor and writer
3. Additional: Professor, artist, designer, and idea enthusiast
4. Additional: Professor of linguistics, has done PHD work on literature and trauma

#### Annotated Bibliography

Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2004.

This is a book that consistently comes up in my conversations with academic friends about my research that I've yet to read. If Booker is right and there are seven archetypal themes (Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth) that emerge from all literature in any time period, then these archetypes might be helpful in creating a simple pedagogy for matching themes from children's literature to the overarching narrative of Scripture. Identifying the theme within the children's book might be the essential launching off point for the adult in facilitating the conversation about God with the child.

Bosch, Rosan. *Planning Learning Spaces: A Practical Guide for Architects, Designers and School Leaders*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2019.

Bosch builds off futurologist David Thornburg's theory of learning and communication archetypes (mountaintop, cave, campfire, and watering hole), adding "hands on" and "movement" to the list, to offer a practical guide for anyone designing spaces for education. If I prototype an immersive book experience that is interactive, Bosch's design approach might help me create an environment for faith formation that is multisensory. While I believe literature will continue to be a medium for developing the imagination of children, embracing Bosch's communication and learning archetypes may open up the possibilities for teachers and children alike to experience stories in a fresh and developmentally effect way.

Enns, Peter. *Telling God's Story: A Parents' Guide to Teaching the Bible*. Charles City: Olive Branch Books, 2010.

Enns brings his expertise in Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Literature to the task of teaching the Bible to children in a 12-year plan. He uses a 5-act narrative approach to telling God's Story and offers a scope and sequence with developmental stages in mind. I heard about this book from the pastor of a house church in Portland, Oregon who was desperate for children's ministry curriculum that would appeal to young parents who had deconstructed, or are beginning to reconstruct, their faith. Enns was the best option for a community of parents that did not want to teach their children what they had themselves unlearned. This narrative approach to teaching the Bible to children may serve as a helpful guide if I prototype a children's ministry curriculum that utilizes children's literature, serving faith communities like the one mentioned above in turn.

Prior, Karen Swallow. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2018.

Swallow is an award-winning professor of English and in this book, argues that to read well is to read virtuously, or to read for virtues. In other words, good books form us, not simply inform us, and we get the most out of reading by being aware of the virtues (or their opposite) displayed by the characters and exploring them. Books are especially fit for this kind of contemplation, as the reader can pause, even walk away for a time, to think about a character. Recognizing themes of

virtues within the characters of children's literature may be a key to unlocking a simple formula for a practical resource that helps adults lead faith conversations with children.

## Appendices

### Design Workshop Description

Prior to my design workshop, I gave each stakeholder an elevator pitch of my research project and an abridged version of my topic expertise essay to read. I conducted my design workshop on April 1, 2021 in-person at College Wesleyan Church in Marion, IN from 3-5pm. We gathered in a spacious classroom to accommodate social distancing, with a large whiteboard for ideation exercises. My stakeholders included: a worship arts director with experience designing at-home liturgies for families, a children's ministry director and founder of a nonprofit centered on transforming the community through play, a graphic artist and a read-aloud parent, an honor's College professor with expertise in spiritual formation, and an outreach pastor that leads a mentoring programing at a local elementary school.

I began the workshop with brief introductions, including the question, "What's your relationship to children's literature and who are the kids you know who are at stake in this project?" Then I reshared my three biggest discoveries about the faith formation possibilities of children's literature. From there we launched into design thinking exercises. I adapted parts of my design workshop plan based on the recommendation of one of my stakeholders, an artist and professor of design, who regularly leads design thinking workshops. I conducted the following design thinking exercises: "selective erasure," "juxtaposing things or contexts," "kindly interrogating assumptions," and "joyfully embracing limits." The activity "Brainwriting" was profoundly effective and helped us narrow the project possibilities to three big ideas. I would rank the success of the design workshop a 4.5 out of 5. My only disappointment was ending the conversation at a place of momentum and before we could articulate a "definition of done." I simply could not get a high caliber team like had together at one time for more than 2 hours.



## Children?

formational age  
sense of wonder  
imagination  
blank canvas  
adults, too

w/ adult it would deconstruction  
kids are asking  
adults may be resistant  
"I don't like how that ending"

## Teachers?

parents?

they're intentional

teachers are w/ kids a lot

but they're not

## Children's Literature?

accessible, written at their level  
overlooked for value  
formative effects

life lesson that is developmentally appropriate  
taps into imagination

imagination is easy for kids

active engagement

literacy won't go away

something powerful in it

some other book association with what I know  
but kids book you can just pick up

different mood, patience

vs  
screen time











Idea 1

Idea 2

Idea 3

Person 1

Curriculum for  
Adults to Teach  
Fatty Formation  
Through Children's  
Lit.

Create a  
series of  
exclusively illustrated  
kid's books that  
could be used  
for fatty formation.

Identify a  
cannon/library  
that can be  
easily used for  
fatty formation.

Person 2

Perhaps turn this  
into a "follow up" from  
SPLASH "Today I read  
in SPLASH" followed with  
ideas for parents to continue  
a conversation at home  
based on the book we  
utilize in our curriculum to kids

Maybe avoid illustrations  
so the imagination of  
children can fill in  
more details.

Use this cannon  
to inform podcast  
content.

Person 3

Teach thru  
living it out  
rather than an  
extra class parents  
have to attend

What if this included  
some digital form  
where teachers/parents  
could discuss peer to peer?

Partner with faith-informed  
artists (like folks @ ILLU)  
who's artwork could drive  
these conversations home?  
Kids books are all about  
great illustrations!

	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
Person 1	Children's Literature added to SPLASH curriculum plan that creates opportunity for kids to explore the <del>text</del> objective or word of the day.	Sunday School Big Idea then turned into a podcast where we equip parents to explore the Big Idea through children's literature.	Turn a book experience into a play experience that allows children opportunity to explore the book through their senses. - Avoid putting defined images to their imag-ination
Person 2	Identify characters/ moments of Gospel + use child lit. to journey through each event. - create - full - immersion - lesson - presentation - as a story - as a lesson - as a story	You could make a Curriculum / podcast for all your favorite child lit. books. Work paper through the book's formative potential	Use book characters to represent facets of the Spirit. [This character] = Love _____ = Joy _____ = Peace YES!
Person 3			

Idea 1

Idea 2

Idea 3

Person 1

Thorough, informative  
book

FOR TEACHER - in depth

NEEDS TO BE TOLD -  
AUSIE FOR BOTH THOSE  
OF CHRISTIAN FAITH AND  
THOSE WHO ARE NOT.

(pocket/hand-held size)  
Brief guide ->  
questions to ask kids,  
clues to look for in a  
narrative, a few examples

FOR TEACHER - guide use

WOULD HAVE GUIDED BY  
ALL CHILDREN?

- Poster for wall -  
concise questions or  
mottos that guide  
reading or spark  
curiosity/engagement

FOR TEACHER & CHILD

NEEDS TO BE DESIGNED  
WELL, USUALLY IT MUST  
ENGAGE CHILDREN'S CURIOSITY/  
IMAGINATION.

Person 2

Person 3

Dividing the  
most "controlled" option  
but feels like more  
freedom is better,  
like here ->

Well that's basically  
the idea.

But yeah, you might  
have to make multiples  
based on age groups. So  
maybe your book at 5-10

Bookmarks ~~for~~ for  
ages 4-5, 6-7, 8-9, etc.

Love the poster  
idea - or even bookmark  
So that after any session  
of reading you've got  
a single list of questions  
to talk through no matter  
the book



	Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
Person 1	Develop a set of questions to frame a "faith encounter" w/ each kids book. (ie. Ask questions of "what did figurines look like in this story?")	Matt Beck Podcast with each episode Breaking Down theological implications of relevant kid. lit. (popular) YES!	Develop weekend workshop for teachers highlighting archetypes of child lit & their relations to faith formation.
Person 2		List of quality books that can prompt discussion about particular topic ie stories about redemption, stories about awe & wonder, stories about forgiveness, etc	A sort of book club for teachers reading children's lit. WHY? Because sometimes we teach better the things we are excited about. Conversation about the faith narratives may be encouraging.
Person 3		make this a youtube channel instead that allows for more songs to be used in the discussion of a book.	A teacher mailing/newsletter that highlights a book and how it can be used effectively in class that teachers can subscribe to.

Idea 1	Idea 2	Idea 3
<p>Create some sort of booklet/resource that guides teachers through discovering the formative potential... it could have questions like, who is redeemed/transformed in this story? What characters chose to invest in more life? Where does the opposite?</p>	<p><del>Find</del> Create a resource that explains/identifies moments/elements of "The Gospel" &amp; then are defined formative elements? Like forgiveness, new life, etc.</p>	<p>You could write a book that organizes tons of child. If into Gospel Categories ie. true characters represent Jesus, formative, love, etc.</p>
<p>yes to ↑. ask Questions like "What does sacrifice look like in this story?" "How Did the character demonstrate trust?" "How did characters express love?" etc.</p>	<p>Do teachers understand scripture (or Bible) as a narrative/story? Develop resource to drive that home helps draws better connections between faith &amp; child life.</p>	<p>What if this resource wasn't a book, but a web page? could be super dynamic &amp; visually appealing.</p>
<p>How can you present to the good news but say a way that doesn't come across as cheapism?</p>	<p>SOME TEACHERS WOULD SAY AWAY FROM SOMETHING THAT MIGHT SAY "CHRISTIANITY"</p>	<p>IT WOULD NEED TO BE ACCESSIBLE TO PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND HOME SCHOOLS.</p>

Person 1

Person 2

Person 3



### One-Page Post-Workshop Message to Stakeholders

Dear Stakeholders,

I am so grateful for our time together last month ideating the faith formation possibilities of children's literature. Each of you, not only brought creativity, but also carried the concern of children you personally know and care about who are at stake in this project. I believe now more than ever that children's literature is a serious (and playful) tool for discipleship. The activity of an adult reading to a child and facilitating conversations about God, is not merely developmental, it is sacramental.

Because of your involvement in the design workshop, we've landed on three exciting "big ideas." Here they are:

1. A children's museum-like interactive, kid's book walk-through experience.
2. A thorough, informative textbook with more accessible companion resources like a universal bookmark guide.
3. A children's ministry curriculum designed with kid's books for each lesson.

I will prototype each of these ideas this summer and select at least one to see through to our "definition of done": to deliver an accessible, imaginative, and sacramental resource that facilitates God conversations between adults and children through the use of children's literature. Benchmarks for success will include enthusiastic testimonies from adults and children that new discoveries about God emerged from the resource or experience and the commitment to adopt this resource by churches, educational institutions, or parents.

Since our workshop, I have stumbled upon some promising resources that may serve our project and the three big ideas. Rosan Bosch's work on communication and learning archetypes may help us in prototyping an immersive book experience. Karen Swallow Pryor's book, *On Reading*

*Well*, and Christopher Book's classic, *The Seven Basic Plots*, together could help us create a formula for recognizing themes and character virtues within a children's book to prompt God conversations. If you come across any more resources or research, please pass them along. Your curiosity and commitment to this project has enhanced my research greatly and continues to inspire the work. Thank you once again.

Warm regards,

Matthew Beck

### One-on-One Interviews Documentation

#### Interview 1: Professor, artist, designer, and idea enthusiast

- Likened the project to “bridging different languages,” “seeing God is something that is not specifically about God,” “empathy and image-ing the kingdom”
- Talked about a design resource that used a “filter” to view a sonnet in different ways (possible application to the “bookmark” idea)
- Is there something to be learned from theatre programs?
- Perhaps some books could lead an adult to ask a child: “How could we reimagine this?”  
This promotes a growth mindset vs fixed mindset
- Storyteller could ask: “What might God’s plan be for the next thing?” or “What happens next, after this story? For the main character and for us?”
- Pull out a different “what if” out of the story
- The “already but not yet” aspect of the Kingdom of God matches children’s literature
- Check out Rosan Bosch’s cardboard kits (build your own fort)

- Maybe use the parts of the story “middle, beginning, end” to talk about the themes in Scripture
- The spacial aspect of stories...where we hear stories for the first time. Location matters.
- Synthesize things that are different. What is the “through line” of children’s literature and the Bible
- Recommends “getting everything on the wall and use actual thread to connect things.”  
Print a picture of all the books you’ve read, put them on the wall, and make connections.
- Use books to capture discoveries about God. Display a kids book with a printed statement of the discovery.
- Read about Rosan Bosch’s communication and learning archetypes
- Books: The Carrot Seed, You Are My I Love You, anything by Nancy Tillman, The Kitchen Knight, Where’s Waldo, the giant Richard Scary books
- Use the image and illustrations, not just the text, in faith formation
- Bill Johnson/Fujimora (“God hides things for us not from us”)
- Look up: Intro to George McDonald (myth as a different kind of truth, let realism die)

Interview 2: Professor of linguistics, has done PHD work on literature and trauma

- Writing about trauma can help us heal (expressive writing)
- Read: Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count by James W. Pennebaker
- Fictional testimonies of growth and character development can help survivors of trauma heal
- Question: Does fiction, because of its “distance” from the reader, make it easier to open up traumatic wounds to the story for healing?

### Interview 3: Young adults pastor and writer

- Offer a “top 10” children’s books for faith conversation list each year
- Chapter by chapter guides
- Bookmark-like tool that fits onto a book like a band on a notebook that has prompts for the adult to lead God conversations
- An book walkthrough event around Christmas time
- You’ve got to offer adults a new “hermeneutic” for reading Scripture and children’s books
- Your project assumes Biblical literacy. Parents have to be savvy enough to bounce back and forth between the Bible and a children’s book

### Interview 4: Graphic artist and a read-aloud parent

- Let the kids in on what’s happening. Maybe the kids can lead the conversation better than the adults at times!
- It’s even the books we should put down and not finish that a faith formation conversation can happen
- Noticed a pattern within a series someone recommend to her to read with her kids. The main character’s unvirtuous actions were consistently rewarded and another’s virtuous behavior was disregarded. Saw this thinking affect her girls, but it lead a good conversation
- Having a substantial resource (textbook) but also an accessible one (bookmark) is “generous” design

- Read: Oliver Jeffers' *Once Upon an Alphabet* and *The Heart and the Bottle*, Peter Reynolds *The Dot* and *Ish*
- If there was a way to immediately “diagnose” the kind of story the reader is reading, they could go to a certain set of questions or prompts for the child

## APPENDIX D—MILESTONE 4 PROTOTYPE ITERATION REPORT

### Prototype Summary and Findings

#### PROTOTYPE #1

**Prototype Description:** A children’s ministry curriculum designed to use children’s picture books to facilitate conversations about God. Five full lessons, given to a Sunday school teacher to lead.

**NPO Statement:** Teachers of Children have underappreciated or not recognized the faith formation possibilities found in children’s literature.

**Research question:** Can a Sunday school curriculum centered on children literature, be effective in facilitating an adult-child conversation about God?

**Assessment Benchmark(s):** Child visibly or audibly expresses curiosity about God. Adult reports confidence in leading conversation. Child or adult reports a discovery about God due to the conversation.

**Participants Description:** Children’s ministry volunteers and staff, average of 7-12 local elementary age children, Wednesday night children’s ministry programming event

**What I learned:** What worked is that the selected books and curriculum actually facilitated effective and joy-filled conversations about God, evidenced by the responsiveness and excitement of the teacher and children. What could be approved is the presentation and format of the curriculum, making it more readable and aesthetically pleasing. What matters to the participants is that they have a chance to contribute (children), that it is fun (children), that they feel prepared to facilitate God-conversations (teacher), that the curriculum is concrete (teacher), and that the curriculum doesn’t force the spiritual application (teacher).

**Important Discovery:** Providing hands-on, interactive elements (concrete) is essential to the child catching the through line from the children's book to the Bible to their lived experience.

**Documentation:** See Appendix A

## PROTOTYPE #2

**Prototype Description:** Sample chapters and a table of contents for a thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature, with more accessible companion resources like a universal bookmark guide.

**NPO Statement:** Teachers of Children have underappreciated or not recognized the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature.

**Research question:** Is there an audience amongst professors, Sunday school teachers, and parents for a thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children's literature and/or a companion resource that can function as a standalone discipleship tool?

**Assessment Benchmark(s):** Professor reports interest in assigning the book as a course requirement for classes. Sunday school teacher or children's ministry volunteer reports interest in reading book as a development opportunity. Parent reports interest in using bookmark resource as a discipleship tool at home.

**Participants Description:** Children's literature professor, Sunday school teacher and parent, social media followers

**What I learned:** What worked is that the sample chapters and table of contents for the book prototype were enthusiastically received by the children's literature professor. After looking at the materials, it is definitely something he would and wants to assign in his courses. The social media response to sharing the table of contents also drew significant interest from both academic and nonacademic circles, so finding the overlap between the educator and the parent was

achieved. What could be approved is the concluding chapter (“Calling All Sub-Creators”). One parent shared, “I am not a writer, how can I contribute?” Additionally, what matters to the participants is that the bookmark tool is both interactive for kids and useful to parents.

**Important Discovery:** There is even more interest and excitement around this prototype than I anticipated. Parents, children’s ministry workers, and graduate level educators find my project to be unique and are all looking for a tool like this, whether they initially knew it or not.

**Documentation:** See Appendix B

### MVP (Most Viable Prototype)

Considering what I learned from my prototyping, the Most Viable Prototype is Prototype 2: “A thorough, informative book on the faith formation possibilities of children’s literature, with more accessible companion resources like a universal bookmark guide.” However, the work I did for Prototype 1 can be included in this project, or at least parts of it, as appendices or examples within selected chapters.

I believe Prototype 2 is the most viable because of my skillset and available resources. With the momentum of this prototype, I am confident that time limitations will not hinder this project moving forward. I have everything mapped out for my book, several chapters already started, and have received challenging and encouraging feedback that will motivate me to complete it.

All along this process, I have believed that my skillset was most suited to a writing project.

While this project may lead to other projects, certainly some digital, as I aim to use my research to serve teachers of children (parents, Sunday school teachers, education professors, etc.), a print resource will be the foundation.



Beyond the book, my stakeholders are also committed to prototype 2 because of the companion bookmark, solidifying its viability. Along with helpful tweaks to the bookmark, an idea for producing it emerged from the prototyping and I have a graphic artist willing to work with me. The bookmark can be used as a standalone resource, but with a simple QR code, can lead users to my book. The portability of the bookmark will give my research far-reaching potential.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### **Interview with children's ministry volunteer/teacher (June 22, 2021, 2pm)**

#### **Where and what grade do you teach?**

Kindergarten (3 years in K, 2 years 4th, back to K)

Allen Elem

6 years

IWU grad

Prof McCracken (one of his finals is to grab a random kids book from his shelf and write how you see God in it, "if you'll look you will find him")

#### **What is your greatest joy in teaching and what is a significant challenge for teachers right now?**

The "discovery moment"

When things "click"

Joy, having fun

"Light up"

Figure stuff out

A lot to do, few resources

Academics and social/emotional

Wearing a counselor hat

No backup

Marion loves to try new things, all in, constant shifting in curriculum

**How long have you been volunteering in Splash?**

6 years

1st grade classroom

**What keeps you on the team?**

Kids ministry is on my heart

Families are reached through their kids (kids see things differently than adults)

It's just fun

**What's the curriculum like that you use? What does prep look like?**

Life way curriculum

A big box with a curriculum

Starts with active games, then story with a picture card, some sort of response time (game, craft, experience), weekly bible truth (like "the church prayers")

Look at the lesson ahead of time, just a glance, sometimes change the craft (a couple times a month, small adaptation)

Sometimes I just walk in

If I didn't have a teaching background, the curriculum would be difficult, know developmentally appropriate

**What was your first reaction when Stephanie said we would be using a curriculum this summer that utilized kids's books?**

Excited

Its super powerful

Just gave a pitch

**Your first impression/lasting impression of the curriculum was...**

A lot was abstract (So I rearranged things, put the question before the book, more time with pictures, tie it to their experience, had them be quiet and get loud, two worked because it was short, both sides made the conversation richer)

Liked: from exploring the book, enjoying the book first, find the less after

Let them discover the Biblical truth

**How much prep did it require?**

Not a ton, read through them, maybe 15 minutes looking at the curriculum, “things to remember notes”

**How might you change the format?**

(“I like to get a jist”) separate the questions, bullet points vs script (less wordy in the body, blurb at the top - this is what this lesson is about, discussion question listen)

**What might you do similar, differently?**

Optional response element (beyond discussion), include art response.

Moving toward concrete: the younger kids you have to lead a little bit, more relatable to start, scaffolding the questions a bit

**Any advice?**

Don’t get too teachy, let kids books be on their own, help kids look for God in unusual places

**Book recommendations:**

Mac Barnett, Jon Clausen (the hat series, wolf the duck and the mouse, Billy twitters and his blue whale problem)

Leo Lioni (Frederick) a lazy mouse, individual talents, special skills

## Children's Ministry Curriculum

### 1. *Circle* by Barnett and Klaussen



**Theme(s):** Curiosity, imagination, what God is like, how we know what God is like, Jesus, loving one another

**Passage:** 1 John 4:11-12, 19

**Read the book.** When you get to the last page (“If you close your eyes, what shape do you picture?”), invite the children to actually do this. Give them 30-60 seconds with their eyes closed to imagine what shape might be in the dark, then ask a few of them to share their answer aloud.

**Prompt the children to think about God:** Then, invite the children to close their eyes one more time and ask, “When you think about God, what do you picture?” A few seconds later: “What facial expression, if you pictured a person, is God displaying?” Pause. “What is God saying or doing?” After a few seconds ask, “When you think about God, how do you feel?” Then give the children an opportunity to share their answers to any of the prompts.

**Connecting the passage:** *Circle* will help us imagine the “shape” of God (what God is like, how God makes us feel, where God is, and even what God might look like). *1 John 4* will help us picture God through participating in a loving community.

**Read the passage:**

“Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us...We love each other because he loved us first.” - John 4:11-12, 19

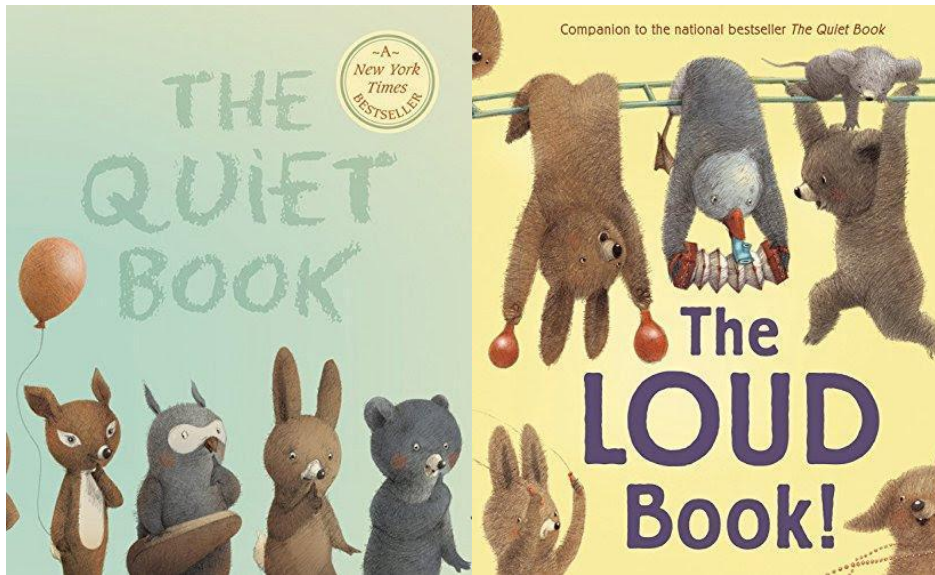
**Joyful announcement** (a short teaching): Say something like: The writer of 1 John says “no one has ever seen God,” so we don’t know what God looks like, except in the sense of those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus while he was on earth in human form. The writer goes on to say this later in the book. Based on where Jesus grew up, he looked something like an average brown-skinned man from the modern Middle-east. He probably had facial hair and wore a tunic and sandals. His favorite food was pizza (ok I made that last part up).

We sort of know what Jesus looked like, but the writer of 1 John is referring to God the Father in this passage, and there is no way we can know what God the Father *looks* like (only Jesus knows), but we can know what God the Father *is* like. One way to know what God is like is to belong to a circle of friends and family who love each other really well. When we love each other, says the writer, God “lives in us.” Love, the kind that Jesus showed us and talked about (“God first loved us”), gives us a picture of God. It also gives a picture of God to those who do not yet know that God loves them.

**Ask, “What does it look like to share the love God gives us with others?”**

After hearing and affirming some of the responses, share some of your own. Then conclude with this summary: **“We know God because God shared his love with us. And when we share that love with each other, everyone sees a picture of God.**

## 2. *The Quiet and Loud Books* by Underwood and Liwska



**Theme(s):** Sounds, memories, what God is like, the noises God makes, how God talks to us, how we talk to God, prayer, worship

**Passage (s):** 1 Kings 19:11-12, Psalm 100

**Read *The Quiet Book*.** After the last page, ask, “What is your favorite kind of quiet?” Consider giving each child a chance to answer (or pass).

**Prompt the children to think about God:** Say, “sometimes God speaks to us in our favorite kinds of quiet. Do you think that’s true? The Bible tells a story about a prophet, a leader for God, who experiences God in the quiet.

**Connecting the passage:** Read 1 Kings 19:11-12.

“The LORD said [to Elijah], “God out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

“Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake,



but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper...”

Say, “After all those loud noises, God whispered something to Elijah. In what ways does God speak quietly to us?”

You may need to offer a couple ideas to get them started (“God speaks to us in the quiet noise of listening to our breathing and this noise let’s us know God made us.” “God speaks when we find a quiet spot to read our Bible. Without all the other noises in our lives we can hear what God has to say.” “God speaks to us in the quiet of our beds at night when we pray before we sleep.” Using giant sticky notes or a white board make a “Quiet List.”

**Now read *The Loud Book*.** After the last page, ask, “What is your favorite kind of loud?”

Consider giving each child a chance to answer (or pass).

**Prompt the children to think about God:** Say, “Just like how God uses “quiet” to talk to us, sometimes God uses “loud” to get our attention. While God used a silent night sky full of stars to quietly talk to Abraham about God’s blessing, God used a noisy and bright burning bush to talk to Moses about God’s big rescue plan for his people. If God uses both quiet and loud to speak to us, we can also talk to God using both quiet and loud. Here’s an example in the Bible about how we can use our “favorite kind of loud” to communicate with God:

**Connecting the passage:** Read Psalm 100:

Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth!

Worship the Lord with gladness.

Come before him, singing with joy.

Acknowledge that the Lord is God!

He made us, and we are his.

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving;

go into his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him and praise his name.

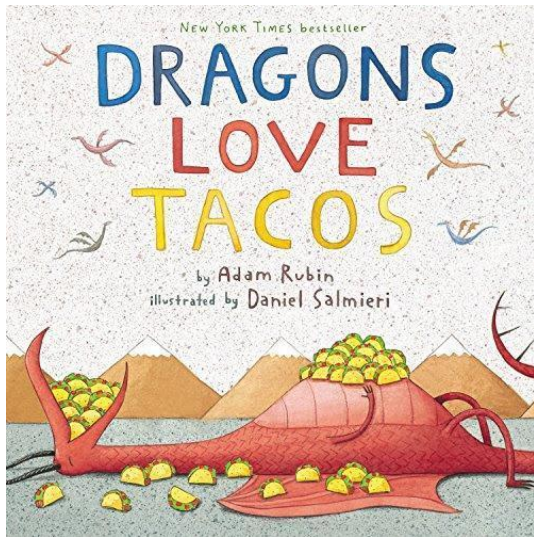
For the Lord is good.

His unfailing love continues forever,

and his faithfulness continues to each generation.

**Joyful announcement:** “God made both quiet and loud as ways for God to talk to us and for us to talk to God. Perhaps, God wants to use your favorite kind of quiet and favorite kind of loud to have a conversation this week.” Consider ending with another worship song.

### 3. *Dragons Love Tacos* by Adam Rubin and Daniel Salmieri



**Theme(s):** Kingdom of God, how God works in the world, growth, life, things that are small but have a big impact, things that are slow but make significant change over time

**Passage (s):** Luke 13:18-21

**Before You Read:** Begin with, “Today we are going to read *Dragons Love Tacos* and as we read it, I want you to think about what food you love as much as dragons love tacos.”

**Read *Dragons Love Tacos*.** Say something like, “Wow dragons really do love tacos. What food do you love as much as dragons love tacos?” Give each child the opportunity to answer the question. Follow up with, “Now let’s each imagine we are enjoying our favorite food. Picture a whole boat full of that food. A party with endless amounts of that food. Maybe hold out your hands as if you are about to eat that food. Ok, now freeze. Now imagine hidden in your favorite food were tiny, spicy jalapeno peppers? How would you react? We’re going to take turns reacting to the thought of that in one word or one noise.” Let each child respond.

Then say, “This book, *Dragons Love Tacos*, got me thinking about how small things can have a big impact. Small things like tiny, spicy jalapeno peppers. Even the smallest bite can make your tongue feel like a sun burn, right? But, it’s not just tiny spicy things that can make a

big difference. Let's read about how *something small and something slow* can be big in our Bible passage for the day."

**Connecting the passage:** Read 13:18-21

Then Jesus said, "What is the Kingdom of God like? How can I illustrate it? It is like a tiny mustard seed that a man planted in a garden; it grows and becomes a tree, and the birds make nests in its branches."

He also asked, "What else is the Kingdom of God like? It is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough."

Jump in with: "When Jesus says 'the Kingdom of God is like' what he means is, 'This is how God works in the world. This is how God makes the world like heaven.' And so the way God works in the world is in small and slow ways. Small like a seed...that grows into a tree. Slow like yeast..that becomes bread."

Pass around a seed and little bit of yeast. Say something like, "Isn't it wild how something so small and so slow, grows into something so big and important: like a tree (picture on the screen) and like bread (picture on screen). Did you know it takes most trees at least 30 years to be fully grown? Have you sat and watched a tree grow? It doesn't appear to be growing, but it is all the time. And it starts out as a tiny seed!"

Ask, "Can you think of anything else that is small or slow that can turn out big and important over time?" Take a few answers.

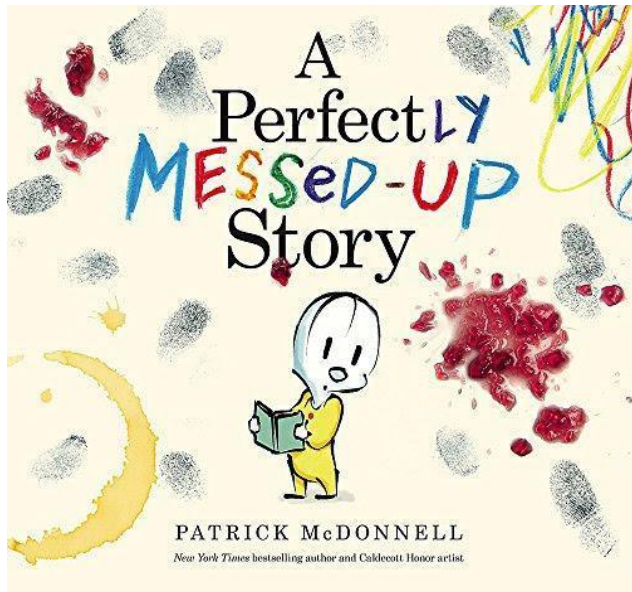
**Joyful Announcement:** Conclude with, "I can think of something. The small kind and courageous actions we do everyday. The ongoing friendship and love we offer our friends,

family, and neighbors. Those actions, Jesus says, may seem small and may take time, but they are big and important. That's how God works in the world. Through us."

Ask, "What are some small and slow ways you can join God in making our world, like it is in heaven?" Make a list on a whiteboard.

Offer a prayer, something like: "God, thank you for the small and slow ways you do big and lasting work in our world to make it more like heaven. Teach us how to plant seeds of kindness and offer love that grows like yeast to everyone around us. Just like Jesus does for us. Amen.

#### 4. *A Perfectly Messed-Up Story* by Patrick McDonnell



**Theme(s):** God’s love, grace, mistakes and messes, redemption

**Passage(s):** The story of Joshua (and Jesus) from the *Jesus Story Book Bible* (pages 80-83)

**Before You Read:** Introduce the story and say, “As we read this *Perfectly Messed Up Story*, I want you to think of a time when you got really messy or you made a really big mess of something. It could be on purpose or by accident. To help you think of a story, lets make a quick list of things that are messy. I’ll go first: smores and glitter. What can you think of?”

**Read *A Perfectly Messed-Up Story*.**

**Exploring the story:** Say something like, “Wow, that book got really messy! Have you ever had a book get that messy?” Allow a child or two to answer. “Ok, beyond messy books, did you think of a messy story? Can anyone tell me about a time when they got super messy or made a mess of something?” (Maybe have your own messy story to tell)

**Connecting the passage:** “So far, we’ve talked mostly about silly messes, and those kinds of messes are not really big deals, right? Like in Louie’s case, the peanut butter and jelly and crayon marks in the book didn’t ruin his story, everything was fine in the end, “messes and all”

he decided. But sometimes in real life, everything is *not* fine as it was for Louie. Sometimes things can go wrong or get messed up and it might really hurt or we might feel really sad. This happens for a character in the Old Testament named Joshua. Do you know the story of Joshua?

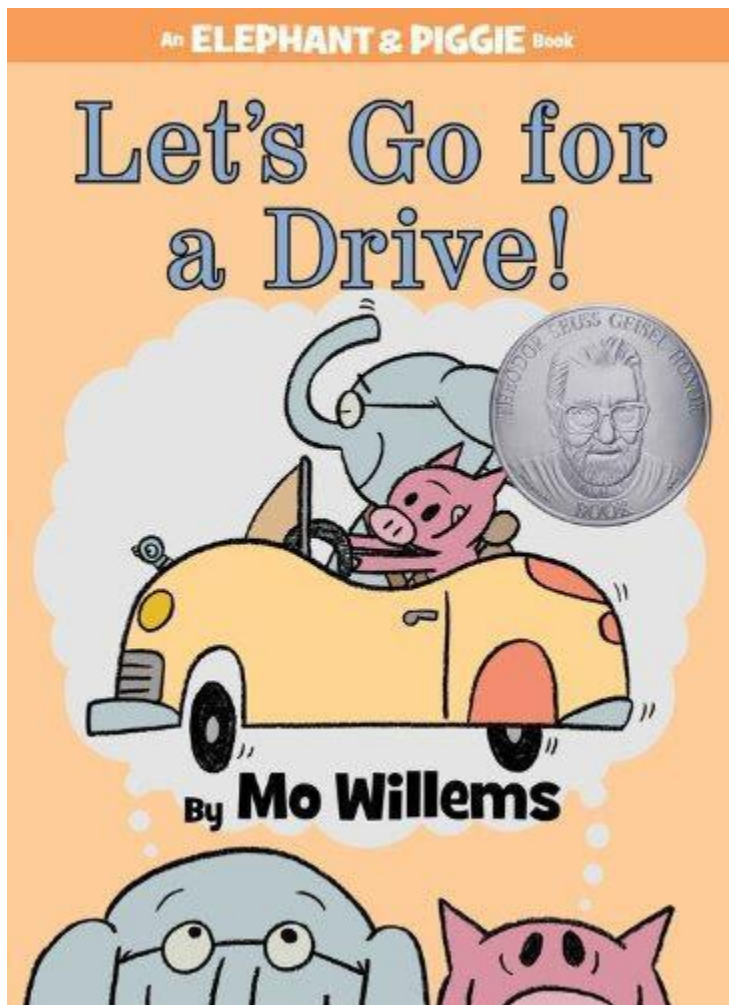
“Joshua found himself in a lot of messes. He was robbed and sold to slave traders by his brothers. They they told their father that Joshua was dead. That must have been really scary and hurtful. Later, he was blamed for something he didn’t do and thrown into prison. How unfair. But God was looking after him the whole time and out of the messed up things, something else good happened. With God’s help, Joseph ended up becoming a prince of Egypt, so that he could help God accomplish his plan for the world through his special family, Israel. That’s not all, let me read one more exciting part:”

Read pages 80-83 of the *Jesus Story Book Bible*. Start with the paragraph that reads, “Now back home...”

**Joyful Announcement:** Wow, Joshua’s mercy towards his brothers was surprising and courageous. That must have been very difficult for him to forgive them. I bet God helped him love his brothers despite the unfair and harmful things they did to him.

And, wait, did you catch the last part of the story I read. Who is the other Prince? (Jesus) Like in Joshua’s story, “God would use everything that happened to [Jesus] - even the bad things - to do something good: to forgive the sins of the whole world.” Now that’s a perfectly messed up story.

5. *Let's Go on a Drive* by Mo Willems



**Theme(s):** road trips, joy, imagination, planning, being flexible, friendship, the “Body of Christ,” God’s community, the church, the fruits of the spirit.

**Passage(s):** Galatians 5:22-23

**Reading the story:** Before you read, ask: “Have you ever been on a road trip? Raise your hands, but don’t tell me where yet. If you are unsure, a road trip is any trip that you take with others in a vehicle – car, van, truck, or SUV. Air planes, boats, and trains don’t count. Let’s see those hands. Who has been on a road trip? Ok, let’s go around the room and share one place that you’ve gone



on a road trip?” Give each child a chance to answer. If they cannot remember what the name of the place was, they can describe what it looked like or what they did there.

**Introduce the book.** Then say something like, “I have one more question for you to think about as I read: “If we were going on a road trip today, what’s one important thing we should pack? Think about that question as we read and then we’ll making a packing list together after the story.”

**Read the book.** Say something like, “That was an unexpected ending! Elephant and Piggie packed everything they needed for a road trip: sunny sun glasses, maps, suitcases, etc. but they forgot the most essential thing right? A car. How silly! Even though they didn’t end up going on a road trip, they still had fun playing pirates. Ok, let’s say you and I had a car for sure and we are going on a road trip together. What are you packing? Did you think of something?” Let each child share one thing they would pack on a road trip, and conclude: “What a great packing list we’ve created!”

**Connecting the passage:** “Those are all great ideas for things we should pack for our road trip. But, besides stuff we can fit in a backpack or the trunk of our car, we need to bring other things – things we can pack in our heart. Because you know what, when you go on a road trip, you sit really close to one another and spend a lot of time together. And sitting really close to even people you love for a long time can be tough. We might get tired and a little grumpy or accidently hurt each other’s feelings. So besides packing your clothes, snacks, and a book, you should also pack stuff like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. The Bible calls those the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. And when we pack these things, we are like Jesus. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. Do you ever forget to pack these things on a road trip? Maybe you forget

patience and are in a hurry to get to your destination. Maybe you forget to pack peace when you easily get in an argument with a brother or sister. Maybe you forget to pack joy when your family decides not to pick the activity you hoped to do.”

**Joyful Announcement:** “It’s easy to forget to pack these essential items for a road trip, but if we pray, God will help us. Just like you take time to plan a packing list of things that fit in your backpack or trunk, you can pray about a packing list for your heart. And even when we forget, we can apologize to our friends or family and seek forgiveness. And here’s the good news: God will not only forgive us, but share with us whatever we forgot to pack. And one more thing, the fruit of the Spirit is something we should pack every day. Not just on a road trip. So, let’s think about our packing lists. What do you want to remember to pack this week? Maybe it is a fruit of the Spirit that you often forget to pack or one that grabs your attention today.” On sheets of paper, draw a basic image of a suitcase and write a fruit of the Spirit on it, one for each word in Galatians 5. Ask each child to sit in silence for 30 seconds looking at the suitcases and then decide which fruit of the Spirit they want to “pack” this week. Then invite them to draw their own suitcase image and write the word in the middle.

**Screenshots from video of Prototype Testing (recorded June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021)**



## Appendix B

### **Book Table of Contents**

#### **Intro: The Faith Formation Possibilities of Children's Literature**

Why kids still need good books and why this one needed to be written.

#### **1. Mirrors, Windows, and Wardrobes**

How children's literature tells us about ourselves and others, and how it can take us to other worlds, bringing us back different than we started.

#### **2. The *Eucatastrophic* Tale**

Why Tolkien, Lewis, L'Engle, and others believed that children's literature could uniquely tell the Story of God.

#### **3. Story Conversations**

How read-alouds can lead to conversations about God, where adult and child both make discoveries.

#### **4. Story-Switching**

Learning how to switch back and forth between the Bible, children's literature, and the world of the child to find the through-line of faith.

#### **5. Deluminators, Tesseractes, and Golden Compasses**

Why magical objects are signs of how God works in the world, and how to unpack the metaphors in children's literature to point to God.

#### **6. Recognizing Dragons**

Why reading leads to resiliency and how fictional stories can help children heal from real life trauma.

“Edmund or Lucy or you would have recognized it at once, but Eustace had read none of the right books.”

- C.S. Lewis, *The Dawn Treader*

## 7. Story Places

Why *where and when* you read a story is as formative as the story itself, and how to make the meaning last longer by marking discoveries.

### Conclusion: Calling All Sub-Creators

Why we desperately need a new generation of theologian-storytellers to write true myths for young and old readers alike.

## Book Sample Chapters

### Chapter 1: Mirrors, Windows, and Wardrobes

In a 1990 essay titled “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, Professor Emerita of Education at The Ohio State University, describes the developmental power of children’s literature. She offers three images to explain how books are not mere entertainment, but stories that transform. Sometimes a book is a mirror in that through the narrative or characters we can see catch of glimpse of ourself. They are a “means of self-affirmation” and we read in order to not feel alone, for identity, or perhaps even to discover something new about ourselves yet revealed or unleashed.<sup>113</sup> A child who has discovered a mirror in a book might start embodying and playacting a favorite character or may simply walk

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<sup>113</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” *Collected Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1990), <https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

away after reading the story with a fresh confidence in their own neurodiversity, physical ability, personality, culture, or ethnicity.

Beyond a mirror, a book may also become a window. Rather than reflecting a child's own lived experience or inner world, a book that is a window shows her the experience of another. As a window, children's literature can expand the imagination of a child by opening his mind up to seeing a world that is different than his own. "Did you know that...?" is the reflective phrase of a child who has experienced a window through children's literature.

Books that are really effective windows can also become sliding glass doors. "Readers have only to walk through in imagination to become a part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author."<sup>114</sup> The difference of outcome is, a window gives you perspective while a sliding glass door grants you empathy. There is an emotional connection that pulls the reader into the story. These worlds can be real or fantasy, but the point is that they show the reader something new, invites them in, sends them home forever changed.

That books can be mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors points to the faith formation possibilities of children's literature. As a mirror, the book has the potential to reflect the image of God in the reader. As a window, the book can answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" And as a sliding glass door, the book can invite the reader into the story of God and reveal their role in the grand narrative. For this reasons, as we'll in the next chapter, Sims Bishop's metaphor of a sliding glass door might easily be substituted with C.S. Lewis's magical wardrobe. But before we get there, let's look at some children's books that fluently function as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors...to be continued.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2: The *Eucatastrophic* Tale

On the journey of uncovering the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature, one's search would be amiss not to consider the great 20th century Christian fantasy writers, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. These friends and collaborators are not alone in their literary contribution as Christians who wrote fiction, but the reach of their works is vast and ongoing. And, of particular interest to my question of faith formation through children's literature, they have both, separately, written in defense of fairy tales. One would also do well to ponder the literary impact of Madeleine L'Engle, whose stories have led many wandering souls to truth through fiction. She, like Lewis and Tolkien, was often called on to debate the validity of her genre. Perhaps their arguments might help us make the case for the faith formation possibilities in children's literature in the 21st century.

"I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say," exclaimed Lewis in his similarly titled essay, *Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said*, originally published in *The New York Times* Children's Book section in 1956.<sup>115</sup> But what was it exactly that Lewis had to say? Or to put it more aptly, what story was Lewis trying to tell? A clue is found in his reflection: "I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood...But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency?"<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1966), 37

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

Lewis wanted to communicate what Sunday school and stained-glass windows attempted to communicate to him: the Story of God, and concluded that the best form for that was children's literature. What he helps us imagine here is profoundly practical, a new kind of Sunday school curriculum, a catechism of fictional stories, a teacher carrying picture books and fairy tales. But what makes fantasy the best vehicle for the most fantastic Story?

Lewis takes us on a journey to answer this question. In another write-up, most often recognized as *On Stories* from *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* in 1947, but originally titled, *The Kappa Element in Fiction*, he draws our attention to the "hidden" element (the meaning of "kappa") found in fairy tales and fantasy.<sup>117</sup> This hidden element is in part the story's "peripeteia" or moment of surprise. But it's not the act of being surprised that the reader seeks, Lewis says, its the "surprisingness," the quality of the surprise.<sup>118</sup> To better understand this hidden element of children's literature we must look to Tolkien.

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, J.R.R. Tolkien asserts that the true fairy-story is a "eucatastrophic tale," meaning that it not merely gives the reader the happy ending, but "the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn.'"<sup>119</sup> Joy is what the fairy-tale can say best. Joy is the hidden element. Joy is the curriculum of the Sunday school teacher. But this "sudden miraculous grace" is not a shallow joy, says Tolkien. It does not deny the existence of *dyscotastrophe*, of sorrow and failure." Rather, it rejects "universal final defeat."<sup>120</sup> Madeleine L'Engle is helpful on this point, as well, who wrote in *Walking on Water*: "Art is an affirmation of life, a rebuttal of

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., viii

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 17

<sup>119</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988) 68

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.,69



death.”<sup>121</sup> This is why Tolkien calls the *eucatastrophic* tale “evangelium.”<sup>122</sup> It is gospel, or at the very least, it points to the Gospel. Children’s literature that contains *eucatastrophe*, can tell the story of God or be used to tell the story of God.

In a 2016 essay entitled “What Makes a Children’s Book Good?” New York Times bestselling author of “A Tale Dark and Grimm,” “In a Glass Grimmly,” and “The Grimm Conclusion,” Adam Gitwitz, attempts to find his own answer to Lewis’ question of the hidden element found in children’s literature, though he looks for it by jumping into the timeless debate of what makes a book for kids “good.” Gitwitz organizes the conversation into two camps: those who take a “content-oriented” approach to the question and those who take a “results-oriented” approach. Aware of Lewis’ contribution to the discourse, Gitwitz locates him in the “results-oriented” camp, citing Lewis’ insistence that “a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story. The good ones last.”<sup>123</sup> Perhaps, Tolkien put it even better: “[Children’s] books like their clothes should allow for growth, and their books at any rate should encourage it.”<sup>124</sup> What makes a book for kids good to Lewis and Tolkien? That the story is a shirt that always fits, that they can put back on from time to time, wearing it in and through their adulthood. This, Gitwitz says, is writing children’s stories with an outcome in the mind. “Good,” for these voices, means lasting. In his attempt to answer the question for himself, it is not surprising that Gitwitz references Lewis.

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<sup>121</sup> Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2001), 186

<sup>122</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 69

<sup>123</sup> Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 24

<sup>124</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 46

Like Lewis, Gidwitz's books have been widely read and loved by children and adults alike, they each borrowed from other epics for their own stories, and similarly both authors have had to defend fairy tales from literary critics, parents, and teachers of children along the way. In a 2012 article in The Wallstreet Journal's Speakeasy blog, Gidwitz lays out his treatise in defense of fairy tales, retelling the story of a canceled visit to an elementary school where he was scheduled to read excerpts from his reimagined version of Grimm's fairy tales. Resistance to Grimm's fairy tales, in their original and remade versions, is not new, nor is the universal love for them by children, says Gidwitz. But why are kids still interested in fairy tales? The answer to this question might help Gidwitz answer the first, of what makes a children's book good.

That curious children are enthralled by the gruesomeness of the stories, is the first appeal to fairy tales that Gidwitz identifies, not likely appeasing his censors. That they know the stories are exaggerated or made up is the second reason kids are still drawn to fairy tales, he says, adding that this is also the factor that makes kids not afraid of Grimm (a very good rebuttal to those who reject the merits of fairy tales based on his first reason). And finally, Gidwitz shares the third reason why these tales still capture the attention of their readers: "The land of the fairy tale is not the external world. It is, rather, the internal one."<sup>125</sup> Gidwitz, here, sounds a lot like acclaimed author and psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim, who wrote in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, that what makes fairy tales unique as a genre is that "in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, [fairy tales] start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Adam Gidwitz, "In Defense of Real Fairy Tales", *Speakeasy: The Wall Street Journal*, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2012/10/14/the-forest-beckons-the-magic-of-real-fairy-tales/>

<sup>126</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 6

What Bettelheim and Gidwitz's are saying, and for that matter Sims Bishop, is that these old and bloody tales are a fresh and clear mirror to the interior life of the reader. They show the child another world, inside themselves. But not just a mirror, also a window and sliding glass door, for "fairy tales share the archetypal structure of every story of growth."<sup>127</sup> With a fairy tale, a child might learn something about themselves, they might ponder the situation of another, and they might go on a journey to return home forever changed. What makes a children's book good? Here might lie Gidwitz's answer. But before we draw a final conclusion, let us revisit once more J.R.R. Tolkien.

Gidwitz's insistence that fairy tales are all essentially different versions of one universal story template, fits Tolkien's idea of sub-creation, "his conviction that human creativity is a reflection of the Divine."<sup>128</sup> It is in the poem *Mythopoeia* that we are introduced to humanity as sub-creators, or "little makers,"<sup>129</sup> written in part as a recollection of the legendary conversation he and Hugo Dyson had with C.S. Lewis,<sup>130</sup> the conversation that led to Lewis' conversion to Christianity, which he came to believe to be a "true myth."<sup>131</sup> Not only is Christianity a true myth to Tolkien, it validates myth-making. "Fantasy," he says, "remains a human right, we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."<sup>132</sup> Therefore, our creations mimic the Creator, and much

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<sup>127</sup> Adam Gitwitz, "In Defense of Real Fairy Tales," *The Wall Street Journal*

<sup>128</sup> Diana Glyer, *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings* (Kent, Ohio: Black Squirrel Books, 2016), 130

<sup>129</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 89

<sup>130</sup> Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 188

<sup>131</sup> Diana Glyer, *Bandersnatch*, 16

<sup>132</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 56

more profound than telling us more about ourselves, our own stories tell us about God. Gitwitz's idea that fairy tales all follow one archetype, combined with Tolkien's concept of sub-creation, not only helps us answer the question of what makes a kid's book good, it leads us to consider that perhaps the faith formation possibilities found in children's literature is that they are all signs pointing toward the one "Great Eucatastrophe," the final joyous turn.<sup>133</sup>

What makes a children's book good, concludes Gitwitz, is the response a child has to it. You'll know it when they clutch the book to their chest upon completion, the first or forth time. They embrace the story, he says, "because those books help them find meaning in life, be it moral, psychological, or ineffable."<sup>134</sup> Not entertainment, not escape, but joy is the ultimate indicator of a good book. The good book is the one that leaves a mark. It turns out Lewis' metaphor of a wardrobe in his beloved Narnia series, captures the faith formation possibilities in children's literature. The books themselves are magical wardrobes, transporting the child through their imagination to another world and back. And when they arrive they are different, just like the Pevensie children who tumble back through the wardrobe after their adventures. "Kids will like a book with a great story. But they will only love a book that makes them see the world in a new way," says Gitwitz.<sup>135</sup> The magic of Narnia is not so much Narnia itself, for what good is Narnia if it does not change London. The magic if Narnia, and any good book, is that it leaves the reader transformed, and in turn, the world into which the reader returns. And this is never more true when a child has an adult guide.

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<sup>133</sup> Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 73

<sup>134</sup> Adam Gitwitz, "What Makes a Children's Book Good?," *Cultural Comment, The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-goosebumps-conundrum-what-makes-a-childrens-book-good>

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Interview with Children's literature professor (September 23, 2021)

**First impression of table of contents and sample chapters?** "Hurry up, so I can assign this in my courses before I retire." Interesting, helpful, well-written. Wouldn't change or add anything. How can I help?

**First impression of the bookmark?** Be more explicit with a question about God. Lead the adult and the child to the "big idea." That is where you'll find the truth.

**Other notes:**

- "If it is truth, it is God's truth."
- Doesn't have to be Christian
- Don't be afraid of fiction
- "Wisdom cries out in the marketplace" (Proverbs).
- All children's literature is didactic
- Use the American Library Association's sub categories to add books to your library

Interview with parent and children's ministry worker (September 30, 2021)

**Which chapters are most exciting to you?**

2, 3, and especially 4. They seem to intersect most with my goals as a children's ministry worker and parent.

**What is missing or what would you change?**

I am not connecting with the concluding chapter because I am not a writer. What is the charge or invitation for me?

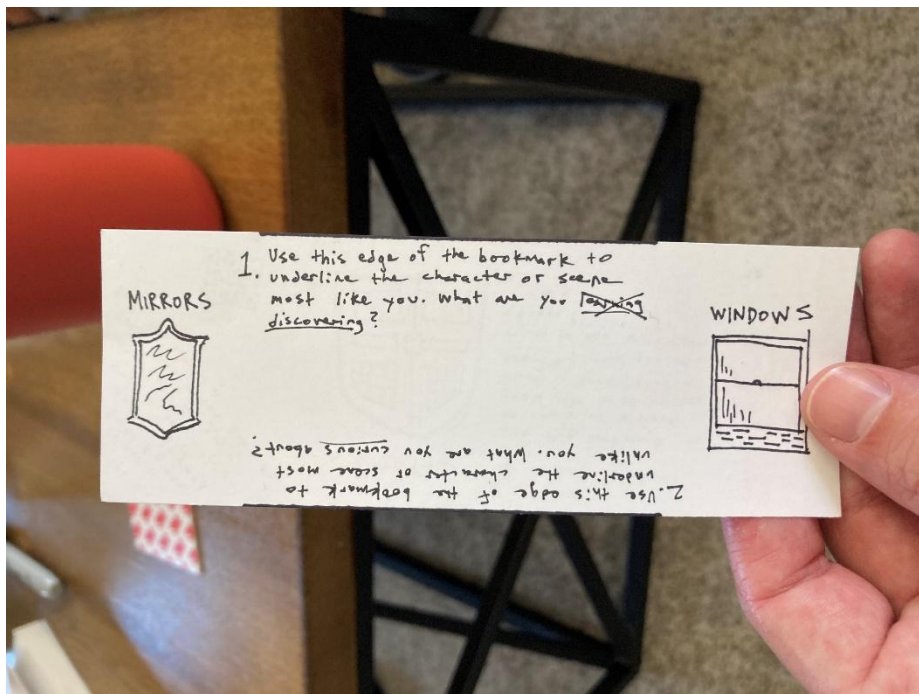
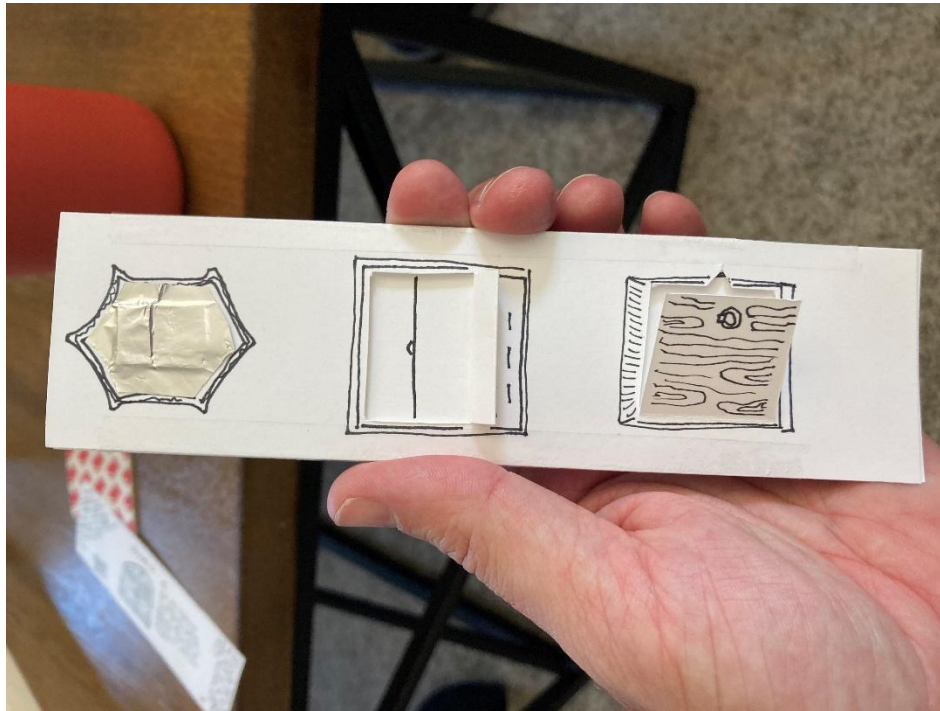
**First impressions of the bookmark?**

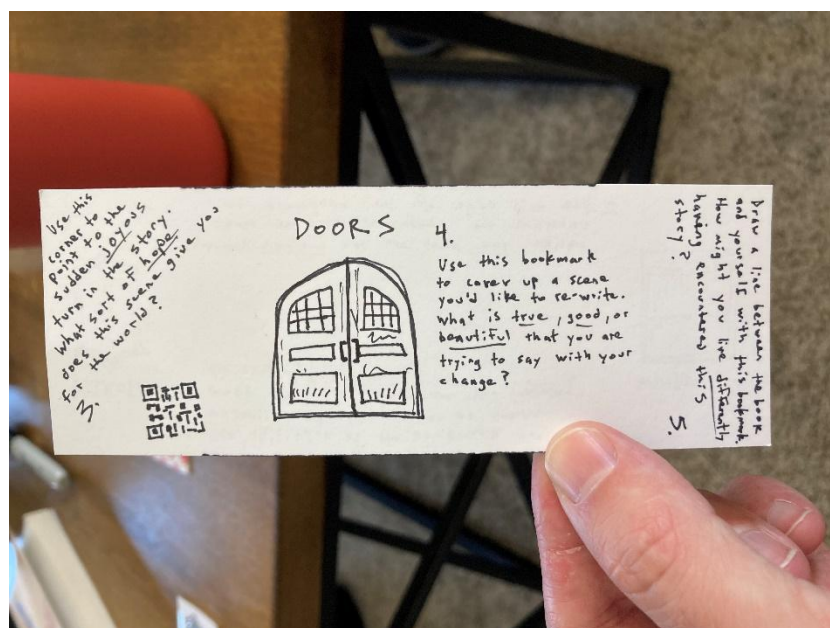
Talked about ways in which we could easily produce a lot of these using a cricut cutter. Love the one with interactive windows and doors. The accessibility and availability is key. You could leave a stack at the library or in a church's children's ministry area.

**Other notes:**

- How can you make this a truly immersive experience? How can we bring stories to Wonderspace (pop-up indoor play space)?
- Even if all truth is God's truth, why not clearly make the connection to Christ?

## Bookmark Prototypes







## APPENDIX E—SUPPLEMENTAL PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

In order to protect my work from copyright infringement in future publication(s), Portland Seminary has agreed to excise my last three chapters and conclusion from the public version of my portfolio that will be uploaded to Digital Commons.

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