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OVER 1,250,000 READERS MONTHLY



“Let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage”

Micheal Flaherty
President, Walden Media

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MICHEAL FLAHERTY is the co-founder and president of Walden Media, a producer of films, books, and interactive programs that tie directly into school curricula. A graduate of Tufts University, his innovative curricula have captured nationwide attention from publications like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Boston Globe*. He has also been published in *National Review*, the *Boston Business Journal* and the *American Spectator*. His company, Walden Media, released its first three films—*Pulse: A Stomp Odyssey*, James Cameron’s *Ghosts of the Abyss*, and *Holes*—to both critical and commercial success in 2003. In association with the Walt Disney Company, it also produced the Academy Award-winning film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This month it will release *Amazing Grace*, which tells the story of William Wilberforce and the movement to abolish the slave trade in Britain. Mr. Flaherty lives in Lexington, Massachusetts, with his wife and three children.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered to an assembly of students and guests at Hillsdale College on January 30, 2007.

At the end of C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe*, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy assume their rightful thrones as Kings and Queens of Narnia. Lewis dedicates only one sentence to describing how they governed during the Golden Age of Narnia, but it is interesting to hear his summary of their most important accomplishments. Lewis tells us that they “made good laws and kept the peace and saved good trees from being cut down and liberated young dwarfs and young satyrs from being sent to school and generally stopped busybodies and interferers and encouraged ordinary people who wanted to live and let live.”

It is interesting to note that the first item of business after keeping the peace and protecting the environment was abolishing school! Narnia is thus the first kingdom where home-schooling is not only encouraged, it is required! But I think Lewis was talking less about the institution of school and more about what was being taught there. And when it came to what was being taught, Lewis thought that stories made all of the difference.

Lewis begins *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* with a memorable introduction of a new character: “There once was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubbs, and he almost deserved it.” In introducing us to Eustace, Lewis believes the best way for the reader to understand him is to know the kinds of books he read. “He liked books if they were books of information and had pictures



of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools.” In other words, he didn’t have time for the types of stories that Lewis adored—stories about heroism, knights and talking animals.

As a result, Eustace is at a significant disadvantage when he first arrives in Narnia and finds himself in a dragon’s lair. “Most of us know what we should expect to find in a dragon’s lair,” Lewis writes, “*but, as I said before, Eustace had read only the wrong books. They had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but they were weak on dragons.*”

The situation worsens when the dragon begins to stir: “Something was crawling. Worse still, something was coming out of the cave. Edmund or Lucy or you would have recognized it at once, but Eustace had read none of the right books.”

Reviving Literary Reading

Clearly Lewis is telling us something about more than dragons and talking mice. He is giving us a simple instruction: You are what you read. We are shaped and influenced by the books that we read. They prepare us for more than interesting conversations—they actually prepare us to face real crises that we encounter in life. Few people would dispute this simple statement, so let’s ask a simple related question: What are we reading today?

The short answer is: Not much. A few years ago, the National Endowment for the Arts released a report entitled “Reading at Risk.” Many people here are probably familiar with its findings, but allow me to repeat the headline: For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature. The decline is across all races, all education levels, and all age groups. While this may come as a surprise to Hillsdale College students, the decline is the most pronounced in their age group. In just twenty years, young adults have declined from being those most likely to read literature to those least likely.

The report went on to show that the decline in literary reading strongly correlates to a decline in cultural and civic participation. Literary readers are more than twice as likely as non-literary readers to perform volunteer and charity work, nearly three times as likely to attend performing arts events, and nearly four times as likely to visit art museums. Before you begin to think that this

is limited to highbrow events, literary readers are even substantially more likely to attend sporting events than non-literary readers. And before you begin to think that the group of people making up literary readers is a group of Luddites that has sworn off electronic media, the report found that literature readers still managed to watch close to three hours of television each day! In other words, people who find time for *Law and Order* can still find time for *Crime and Punishment*.

The report concludes on a rather somber note: at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century. This decline will not be reversed by any one solution. In fact, it will require a number of innovative ones from a number of different groups.

Cultural restoration, Russell Kirk said, begins at home. Certainly the same is true of literacy. And in today’s media saturated culture, I dare to say that it may also begin at the movie theater.

Walden Media was started several years ago by myself, Cary Granat, and Phil Anschutz. We wanted to create a company dedicated to recapturing imagination, rekindling curiosity, and demonstrating the rewards of knowledge and virtue. All of our films would be based on great books, great people, and great historical events. They would be made by the best talent in entertainment and they would all be linked to educational materials developed by some of the best talent in education. We were taking Henry David Thoreau’s famous advice—to march to the beat of a different drummer—to Hollywood, which is why we decided to name our company after Thoreau’s most famous book, *Walden*.

In launching Walden Media, our greatest challenge was in identifying the stories that we wanted to bring to the screen. We did not want to waste our time making films out of “the wrong books” that Eustace Scrubbs wasted his time reading. So rather than turn to the usual parade of agents and Hollywood producers, we launched an unusual campaign that continues to this day. We enrolled in as many educational conferences as we could find. We spoke to tens of thousands of teachers and librarians and asked them what books they most enjoyed teaching and recommending. After seven years, the only thing that seems odd about this strategy is the fact that our company is the only one doing it. After all, who knows stories better than teachers and librarians?

I still remember when we first received a letter from a teacher in Philadelphia recommending a book called *Holes*. We paid little attention to it until the following week, when we received

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dozens more like it. It seems the teacher decided that she wanted to lead the class in an exercise of persuasive writing, and they decided that they would attempt to persuade us to make a film out of their favorite book. The students were quite persuasive, and we went on to make *Holes* as our first feature film. It became a great commercial and critical success.

Our teacher and librarian friends introduced us to a whole new world of authors and books that publishers like to classify as “young adult” literature. But we were surprised to see that the books—while accessible to a younger audience—were every bit as profound and meaningful as the books I had read as a literature major in college. The books deal with real issues—death, racism, divorce, alcoholism, alienation, war. But similarly they all deal with the common theme of redemption. And many deal with faith respectfully, as a critical and transformational force in people’s lives. *Holes* took place in a juvenile detention center—the perfect setting for a redemptive story. Our next film, *Because of Winn Dixie*, told the story of a young girl dealing with her mother’s abandonment, adults struggling with alcoholism, and

the lasting sting of racism. Our upcoming film, *Bridge to Terabithia*, will deal with the toughest issue haunting parents—the death of a child.

Our project has opened up a fair debate about whether children should read books that have such frightening content. C. S. Lewis tackled this issue head-on and offered some good advice that informs how we select our projects:

Those who say that children must not be frightened may mean two things. They may mean (1) that we must not do anything likely to give the child those haunting, disabling, pathological fears against which ordinary courage is helpless: in fact, *phobias*. His mind must, if possible, be kept clear of things he can’t bear to think of. Or they may mean (2) that we must try to keep out of his mind the knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil. If they mean the first I agree with them: but not if they mean the second. The second would indeed be to give children a false impression and feed them on escapism in the bad sense. There

is something ludicrous in the idea of so educating a generation which is born to the . . . atomic bomb. Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker.

In conjunction with every film, we launch an ambitious educational campaign that places the book at its center. Since starting *Walden*, we have distributed hundreds of thousands of books, mostly to Title One Schools that are not able to afford them. When we released *Winn Dixie*, we also launched a program in conjunction with the Girl Scouts of America and Sunrise Assisted Living Centers to draw attention to the “Reading at Risk” report. Girl Scouts across the country volunteered

to read *Winn Dixie* at different Sunrise Centers. In doing this, we were showing one way to reverse the decline in reading and volunteerism at the same time. Recently, with the release of *Charlotte’s Web*, we invited teachers and students to read a section from E. B. White’s classic to break the Guinness World Record for most people reading simultaneously. The previous record was 133,000. At last count, more than 500,000 people participated in all 50 states and 28 countries.

While it is virtually impossible for us to determine if our efforts have made any kind of dent in the decline in reading, there is overwhelming evidence that we have exponentially increased the book sales of the books we have adapted into feature films. The Narnia books saw an increase in sales that was several multiples. In fact, because of the increased focus on C. S. Lewis, sales of his other books increased by several multiples as well.

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Amazing Grace

In February we release two films. Our first, *Bridge to Terabithia*, follows our traditional model of a film based on a popular book—in this case Katherine Paterson’s Newbery Award Winner. And the following week we are releasing *Amazing Grace*, a film based on a great man—William Wilberforce—and a great event—the abolition of the slave trade in Great Britain.

After a powerful conversion experience, William Wilberforce dedicated himself to what he called his two great objectives—the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of society. In pursuing the first, he was challenging a mindset that had existed for centuries. Wilberforce recognized that if he wanted to change the law, he needed to change peoples’ hearts and minds. And he also knew that none of this was possible until his own heart experienced a radical transformation.

Wilberforce’s childhood preacher, John Newton, experienced an even more dramatic conversion than Wilberforce. In a graceless world, absent of God’s mercy, Newton should have rotted in the bowels of a slave ship or been tossed in the sea. Yet God, in his providence, saved this wretch and gave him something he didn’t deserve, a prominent role in the story of freedom. And Newton went on to pen one of the most redemptive songs in human history—“Amazing Grace.”

Wilberforce and Newton both understood



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that they could not accomplish great change alone. It required friends—people from all walks of life and from both sides of the political aisle. Wilberforce called them his “co-belligerents”—people who had many differences but were united in their commitment to end the slave trade and improve British society. Despite decades of defeat, ridicule, and treachery, they were companions for the common good. This March, we will celebrate the 200-year anniversary of their greatest victory—the abolition of the British slave trade.

After decades of defeat, through faith and perseverance, Wilberforce and his friends of the Clapham Sect accomplished what everybody thought was impossible. But their story did not end there. It was said of Wilberforce that good causes stuck to him like pins. Over his lifetime, he launched more than 65 social initiatives, including the first animal welfare society, the first Bible Society and the first National Gallery of Art. He also helped reform penal laws and child welfare laws.

Today we desperately need more leaders like William Wilberforce and the Kings and Queens of Narnia who will fight to make good laws, keep the peace, save good trees from being cut down,

and encourage ordinary people who want to live and let live.

We are all familiar with the problems that good people face, both nationally and globally. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Dr. Martin Luther King wrote that we have two options when faced with such problems. We can act like a thermometer and merely make a record. Or we can act like a thermostat and correct what is wrong.

Let us accept Dr. King’s challenge to help correct what ails us. Whether we fight against illiteracy, poverty, racism, AIDS, or hunger, let’s dedicate ourselves to making the types of sweeping changes that William Wilberforce and his colleagues accomplished. And let’s work in their same spirit of cooperation—finding “co-belligerents” from all types of backgrounds and beliefs. Let us play a role in creating our own great stories of bravery and heroism to give hope and joy to our children.

And then we can all take comfort in the fact that we have lived according to the spirit of the prayer that was written in the Bible placed inside the 1853 cornerstone at Central Hall here on your campus: “May earth be better and heaven be richer because of the life and labor of Hillsdale College.”



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