

# Families

## WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

STORY FOR ALL AGES

### A HEAVENLY PLACE TO READ

BY THE REV. ANDREA GREENWOOD



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**Where do you think is the absolute best place to read? Under the covers with a flashlight? Snuggled with an adult who loves you, whose voice can transform into all the different characters in a book? How about in a tree house, lying flat on your stomach, with your chin propped up in your hands? Maybe you can read braille, and you have a favorite place to get your body comfortable and dance your fingers over the pages.**

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**W**hen I was young, I liked to read in all sorts of places, some of which got me in trouble. You really should not hide in the bathroom with a book during school! But I never had a problem at my favorite place of all for reading: the library. There were square, wooden tables with sturdy oak chairs. The light was always a soft gold, just right for reading and daydreaming myself right into a scene. All around me were books! They lined the walls, were stacked in bins, and sometimes were wheeled around on big metal carts. For me, the library was heaven.

It turns out I was not the first one to think so! Unitarians 150 years ago

felt the same way. They believed in reading, not only for adults, but for children, too—because of what we could learn, and because it was fun! There were Unitarian men like William Taylor Adams (pseudonym, Oliver Optic) who wrote adventure stories about going to sea and traveling the world; and there were Unitarian women like Jane Andrews who wrote family stories that showed girls as smart and funny and active. Some Unitarians peopled their books with Native Americans and African Americans, as well as Europeans. Like Unitarian Universalists who live our faith today, Unitarians who wrote stories often helped us imagine a world of

### Unitarians, Children, and Books



The Families pages are adapted from Tapestry of Faith lifespan faith development programs.

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equality that looked very different from the world they were living in.

Not everyone thought children should have the freedom and opportunity to read library books. Some adults thought books with bad guys in them might make kids bad. Some Christians thought stories about people who weren't Christians might give kids the wrong idea about religion.

Luckily, there were Unitarian women and men who felt differently. They trusted kids, believed in choices, and knew that the bigger the world we recognized and tried to know, the better for all of us. Thanks to them, we have libraries, and children's rooms in them, and my idea of heaven.



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## Read to Someone!

If you're reading this, you can probably read aloud to someone younger. Do you have a favorite book you would enjoy sharing? If there is no young person to read to in your family, you might become a reading volunteer in your school. Or, with a local Reading Is Fundamental program, you can help select books children like to read, lead a reading activity, or help to teach your community why reading for children is important.

## EXPLORING TOGETHER

**R**everend Andrea Greenwood spent a year investigating the history of American children's books. She says, "Everything associated with books for children—adventure stories, rags to riches stories, realistic literature, series books for boys, girls books, picture books, children's rooms in libraries, story hours, libraries in public schools, Newbery and Caldecott medals for children's books—every single one of these was initiated and developed by Unitarians. At last, an explanation for why I feel at home with children's books!"

## Shhh... No Kids in the Library!

**C**aroline Hewins learned to read when she was four years old and soon had her own favorite books which she read to her younger siblings. But she couldn't go to a library, because in 1850 the very few existing libraries charged a fee, did not let children inside, and had no books for children anyway. As an adult, Hewins became one of our nation's first female librarians at a small, private library in Connecticut that charged a fee of \$3 per year (a great deal of money, then) to take out one book at a time. Hewins transformed that library into the City of Hartford's Public Library and gave it one of the nation's first rooms just for children and children's books. Hewins, a Unitarian, published some of the first recommendations of books children would like to read, using a list of suggestions from 50 American and Canadian women members of Unitarian congregations.



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## Children's Books, and the Unitarians Who Wrote Them

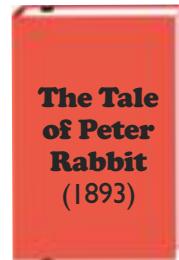
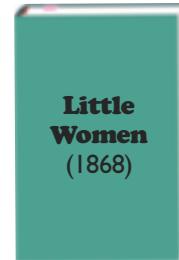
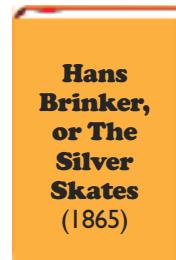
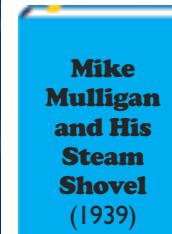
Can you match the titles of these "classics" with their authors?

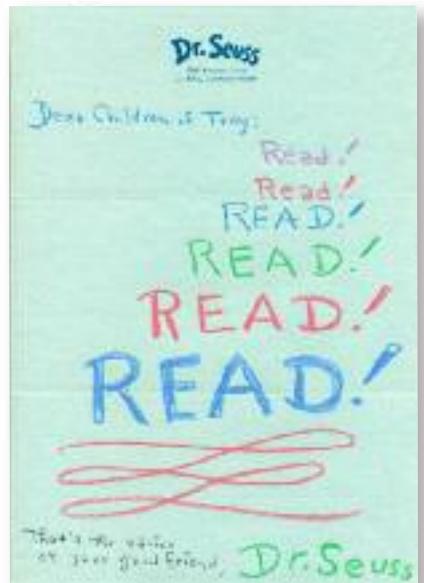
**Louisa May Alcott**

**Beatrix Potter**

**Virginia Lee Burton**

**Mary Mapes Dodge**

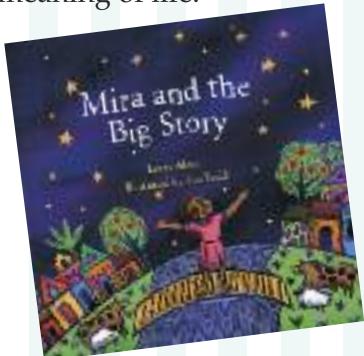




Dr. Seuss bookmark: Cut on the dotted line.

## Skinner House Books

The UUA publishes books for children. *Mira and the Big Story* by Laura Alary uses beautiful illustrations by Sue Todd to tell an allegorical tale about diversity, understanding, and the meaning of life.



## Meet Lydia Maria Child

**D**o you know the old-fashioned song, "Over the River and Through the Wood to Grandfather's House We Go"? It was written by Lydia Maria Child, a Unitarian abolitionist and women's rights activist who also started the first children's magazine in the U.S. Born in Medford, Massachusetts in 1802, she grew up to become a writer of novels, journalism, and political books. When she wrote about how slavery hurts both the enslaved person and the one who claims to own them, in *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* in 1833, many of her readers abandoned her. She was forced to resign as editor of the children's magazine *Juvenile Miscellany*—but we still enjoy her legacy today with magazines like *Highlights for Children*, *Cricket*, *Ranger Rick*, *National Geographic Kids*, and more.



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## Book It!

Have you shopped in a bookstore that has a section just for children's books? Have you sat and read in a library children's room, or taken a book home? In some communities, it is not so easy for a child to find or borrow a book.

### What can you do to help?

■ **Fiesta de Libros** is a partnership created by the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta (UUCA) to "bring the library to the children." Volunteers, age 8 and up, bring books in both English and Spanish to read aloud. Children gather to listen in a library-like space inside a large shopping mall; they can also borrow a book to read to themselves or to take home. UUCA also provides reading tutoring, home-

work help, and enrichment activities at a local school, as a partner in ensuring these children have the resources to achieve their highest level of academic success.

### ■ Ethiopia Reads

([www.ethiopiareads.org](http://www.ethiopiareads.org)) started a network of libraries in rural areas, with donated and new books for children in the major Ethiopian language (Amharic) as well as in English.

### ■ Books for Kids

([www.booksforkids.org](http://www.booksforkids.org)) creates libraries in pre-schools and children's centers that otherwise would not have them. You can donate books if you check with the organization first. Or, raise funds to help purchase books or to renovate bookshelves and surroundings, through the Adopt-a-Library program.

## Reading with Children: An Act of Faith

BY PAT KAHN

**W**hen my children were young, one of our most important family rituals was reading together at bedtime. Sometimes my husband and I would each read separately to a daughter. Sometimes we all gathered together to read... and sometimes they read to me when I fell asleep while reading! Certain, extra-special books created a shared language and experience that is just as alive today as it was then (both daughters are now young adults). As new parents, neither my husband nor I were aware of research on the benefits of reading to children; we are both avid readers, and I suppose if we had thought about it, we would have said that we wanted to pass a love of reading on to our children. But really, we made this special time for the sheer pleasure of it. Ellen Handler Spitz captures this well, in her book *Inside Picture Books*:



**Reading can provide a kind of core experience that feels essential and deeply private, but even so, there is a communal aspect to books. We are in the company of all the others who found themselves in those pages.**

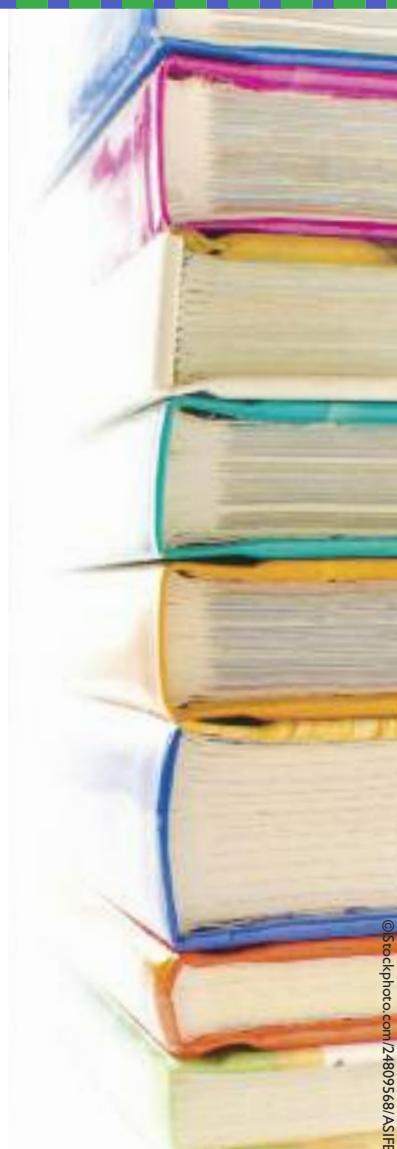
—The Rev. Andrea Greenwood

### FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

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"Reading aloud is an activity fraught with advantages – for grown-ups as well as youthful listeners – and it is a quintessentially relational activity ... through the shared cultural experiences of reading aloud and being read to, adults and young children – in moments of intensely pleasurable rapport – participate in the traditional task of passing on values from one generation to the next."

This one simple practice promotes language development, as well as cognitive, communication, and listening skills, laying the foundation for academic success. Share this act of faith at home and through projects in your congregation or your wider community. Public and school libraries do much to make reading available to all families; find a role as an advocate or a volunteer. Share your story of how you engage in the act of faith of reading with children!



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### FIND OUT MORE

- In 1971, Marguerite Hart, the first children's librarian at the Troy, Michigan public library, asked dozens of actors, artists, writers, politicians, and musicians to share their enthusiasm about Troy's first children's reading room. Letters came in from 1970s celebrities including E.B. White, Dr. Seuss, Helen Gurley Brown, Dan Rowan and Dick Martin, Isaac Asimov, First Lady Pat Nixon, and Clifton Wharton, Jr., the first African American president of a major U.S. university, the University of Michigan. Letters to the Children of Troy Collection, Troy (MI) Public Library, [troylibrary.info/letterstothechildrenoftroy](http://troylibrary.info/letterstothechildrenoftroy).
- "Reading Aloud with Children of All Ages" published online by Derry Koralek, unpacks cognitive and social benefits children gain from being read to.
- Advocate or volunteer to assure children's access to books! See ideas from the American Library Association, [www.ala.org/pla/advocacy](http://www.ala.org/pla/advocacy), and the largest children's literacy nonprofit in the U.S., Reading Is Fundamental, [www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org).
- The Rev. Andrea Greenwood gave the 2013 Minns Lecture, "Sticking with Stories: Unitarianism and the Creation of Children's Literature." Find a video and transcript at [www.minnslectures.org/2013Series.php](http://www.minnslectures.org/2013Series.php).

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