

LIVING BOOKS



LIVING BOOK PRESS



A LIVING BOOK IS A NARRATIVE-DRIVEN WORK BY PASSIONATE AUTHORS THAT BRINGS SUBJECTS TO LIFE, ENGAGING READERS EMOTIONALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY FOR DEEPER UNDERSTANDING AND LASTING IMPACT.

Consider a child learning British history through a standard textbook versus reading *Our Island Story* by H.E. Marshall (a childhood favorite of C.S. Lewis, author of the Narnia books and many others). A typical textbook might list dates, monarchs, and events, but it often lacks the storytelling quality that makes history resonate. In *Our Island Story*, history is presented as a series of interconnected tales, bringing to life legendary figures like Alfred the Great and stories of key battles and events. Children feel immersed in the past, walking alongside historical characters and understanding their motivations and challenges. This storytelling approach helps them grasp the importance of historical events and retain the information far more effectively than mere facts and dates.

Living books are often compared to textbooks and “twaddle.” While a textbook may present numerous facts, it often lacks the emotional resonance necessary for children to connect with the material, leading to forgotten information. Twaddle, on the other hand, might entertain but lacks substance—much like a sugary snack.

The easiest way to understand “twaddle” is to think of a living book as the meat and vegetables of a meal—the essential elements your brain needs to grow strong. Twaddle is like ice cream. Take *Our Island Story* versus a typical series of formulaic chapter books: *Our Island Story* introduces children to complex themes like loyalty, bravery, and justice, while engaging them in Britain’s fascinating past. Though ice cream books can be enjoyable, they may lack depth and challenge, leaving students with little to remember or ponder. Living books cultivate the kind of imagination and insight that help young minds grow.



WHERE DOES THE TERM 'LIVING BOOK' COME FROM?

The concept of living books originates from the educational philosophy of Charlotte Mason, a British educator from the 19th century. Mason believed that education should transcend rote memorization, emphasizing the importance of quality literature that breathes life into subjects. She advocated for the use of living books—texts written by authors who are genuinely passionate and knowledgeable about their topics. This passion ensures that the material is both accurate and engaging, capturing the imagination and interest of learners.

Studies supporting dual coding theory suggest that combining verbal and visual information can improve recall by up to 30%, underscoring the advantage of the rich, descriptive language used in living books.

Charlotte Mason's approach was revolutionary for her time, promoting the idea that education should be a joyful and inspiring experience. By selecting books that tell compelling stories and present information in a lively manner, Mason sought to foster a deeper connection between students and the material they were studying. This method not only makes learning more enjoyable but also enhances comprehension and retention, laying the foundation for a lifelong love of learning.

Mason's emphasis on living books has had a lasting impact on various educational philosophies, including Classical education and modern homeschooling practices. Her legacy continues to inspire educators to choose materials that engage both the heart and the mind, ensuring that education remains a dynamic and enriching journey.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LIVING BOOKS?

Aside from being easy to use and reusable by multiple children, incorporating living books into your child's education offers numerous benefits that make learning more effective. By engaging students both emotionally and intellectually, living books encourage a deeper understanding of the material, leading to a range of positive outcomes.

A study by the University of Wisconsin–Madison found that students who learned through storytelling retained 20% more information than those who studied the same material through traditional methods.

1. ENHANCED MEMORY RETENTION

Our brains are wired for stories and remember story-based information far more effectively than isolated facts. For instance, Stanford professor Chip Heath conducted an experiment where he asked students to give one-minute speeches on non-violent crime. Most students presented data, but only 1 in 10 told a story. When polled 10 minutes later, 63% remembered the stories, while only 5% recalled the statistics.

Similarly, research from the London School of Business found that people retain only 5% to 10% of information when it's presented as mere statistics, but when the same information is delivered through a story, retention jumps to 65% to 70%.

2. INCREASED ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

By capturing students interest through compelling stories and relatable characters, living books create both an emotional connection to their learning, and provide intrinsic motivation to learn.

Emotional Connection: When students are emotionally connected to the material they are far more likely to be invested in the learning process. It may sound obvious, but research from the University of Southern California highlights that emotional engagement in learning significantly boosts motivation and academic performance.

Intrinsic Motivation: A living book will often inspire a love of reading and learning for its own sake, not just as a means to a reward. The Self-Determination Theory emphasizes the importance of intrinsic motivation in education, stating that it is essential for lifelong learning and intellectual curiosity.

By integrating living books into education, students are more likely to develop a lifelong love of learning, which is not only essential for long-term academic success and personal growth but will also be necessary for our children's future. The World Economic Forum estimates that half of the core skills required for jobs will change in the next 3-4 years, making lifelong learning essential to keep up.



3. DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Living books encourage students to think critically and analytically about the content they read. This deepens their understanding of not just the facts, but also the complexities of life.

Problem Solving: Through complex narratives and character development, students learn to analyze situations from multiple perspectives, enhancing their problem-solving skills. This active engagement with the text promotes deeper thinking and the ability to navigate real-world challenges effectively.

As we read *The Children of the New Forest* by Frederick Marryat, my children felt sympathy for the four orphans and their loyalty to King Charles I. However, when we later read *Our Island Story*, they found themselves more sympathetic to the Parliamentarians. This contrast led us into discussions about whether both sides in a conflict can have justifiable reasons and how each party's perspective can shape our understanding of history. They could see that history isn't always black and white but is often filled with complex choices shaped by the values and perspectives of the people involved.



Interpretation and Inference: Unlike traditional textbooks that present information in a straightforward manner, living books require readers to interpret and infer underlying meanings. This process enhances their ability to draw conclusions and make connections between concepts, fostering a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of the material.

In “Charlotte’s Web,” readers are invited to explore themes of friendship, sacrifice, and the cycle of life. Through the interactions between Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider, students infer deeper meanings about loyalty and the impact one individual can have on another’s life. The subtle cues and character motivations encourage readers to look beyond the surface narrative and understand the broader implications of the story.

4. IMPROVED COMPREHENSION AND UNDERSTANDING

Have you ever listened to someone tell a story that meanders from one topic to another without a clear payoff, much like Grandpa Simpson's endless anecdotes? It can be frustrating because we're accustomed to the structured flow of a well-told story.

Living books, on the other hand, wrap often difficult ideas within the familiar and comfortable structure of a narrative. This approach allows them to present students with an abundance of information in a coherent and context-rich manner.

Contextual Learning: By embedding facts within a story, living books provide additional context that helps students understand and remember the material. Unlike fragmented information in traditional textbooks, which can often lack context, living books weave information into a narrative that makes it more meaningful and easier to retain.

Many of you will be familiar with the series about "The Magic Schoolbus". Rather than presenting facts about the human body in a dry, textbook format, "The Magic School Bus Inside the Human Body" follows Ms. Frizzle and her class as they embark on an adventurous field trip inside a human body. Through the narrative, students learn about various organs, the circulatory system, and how the body functions—all within the engaging context of the story. This immersive experience helps students grasp complex biological concepts more effectively than traditional methods.



Simplification of Complex Ideas: Stories have the unique ability to convey difficult concepts in digestible and relatable pieces. “The Lorax” by Dr. Seuss simplifies the complex issue of environmental conservation through the tale of a guardian of the forest. By presenting environmental concepts within an engaging story, students can grasp and relate to the importance of protecting natural resources in a way that straightforward facts alone might not achieve.

5. FOSTERS CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

Living books play a significant role in fostering creativity and imagination in students. By exposing them to diverse stories and scenarios, these books encourage students to think creatively and envision possibilities beyond the presented material.

Creative Thinking: Exposure to diverse stories and scenarios encourages students to think creatively and envision possibilities beyond the presented material.

In “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” readers follow Alice as she tumbles down a rabbit hole into a fantastical world filled with peculiar characters and absurd situations. The nonsensical logic and whimsical events challenge conventional thinking and encourage students to embrace imaginative possibilities.



Imaginative Engagement: Living books invite students to visualize scenes, characters, and events, enhancing their ability to create mental images and fostering a more immersive learning experience.

“The Secret Garden” tells the story of Mary Lennox, a young girl who discovers a hidden, neglected garden and works to bring it back to life. The vivid descriptions of the garden’s transformation invite readers to visualize the blossoming flowers, the changing seasons, and the rejuvenation of the characters themselves.

Living books like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and The Chronicles of Narnia allow students to think beyond the immediate storyline, developing their creativity and imaginative engagement. By visualizing the unique settings and scenarios, students gain skills in creative thinking and mental imagery that will enrich both their learning and personal development.

6. ENHANCED LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Reading living books contributes significantly to the development of strong language and communication skills.

Vocabulary Expansion: Exposure to expressive language and varied vocabulary within living books helps students acquire new words and phrases naturally.

In “Anne of Green Gables,” the vivid and poetic language of Anne’s world introduces students to a rich vocabulary. Anne’s imaginative descriptions and expressive dialogues expose readers to unique phrases and terms that they might not encounter in everyday conversation. This natural absorption of vocabulary enriches their language skills, enhancing both comprehension and expression.

Improved Expression: The practice of narration, a key component of using living books, allows students to articulate their understanding and thoughts clearly, enhancing both verbal and written communication skills.

After reading “The Wind in the Willows,” students might narrate the story of Mole and Rat’s adventures in their own words, capturing the humor, excitement, or suspense. By retelling the story, they practice organizing their thoughts, choosing precise words, and conveying the story’s emotion, which strengthens both their oral and written expression. This exercise enhances their ability to communicate ideas clearly and confi-



dently.



Research published in *Memory & Cognition* indicates that emotional content can enhance memory retention by up to 50%, demonstrating the powerful role of emotions in learning.

7. CULTIVATION OF EMPATHY AND SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

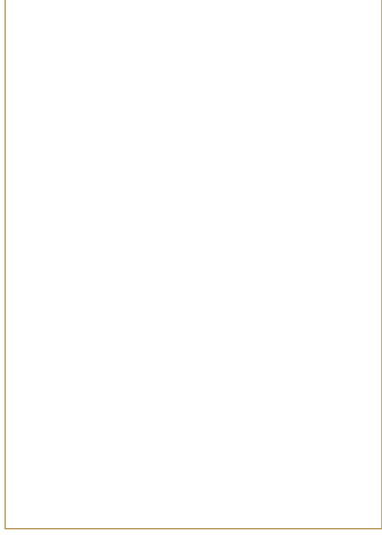
Living books often explore diverse perspectives and human experiences, promoting empathy and social awareness.

Perspective-Taking: By immersing themselves in the lives and viewpoints of different characters, students develop the ability to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives.

In “To Kill a Mockingbird,” readers experience life in a small Southern town through the eyes of Scout Finch, a young girl growing up amidst racial tension and prejudice. Through Scout’s observations and her interactions with characters like Atticus Finch and Tom Robinson, students are invited to consider the injustices and struggles faced by others. This experience fosters empathy as they learn to see situations from multiple perspectives and understand the effects of prejudice and compassion.

Moral and Ethical Development: Many living books address moral dilemmas and ethical questions, encouraging students to reflect on their values and develop a sense of right and wrong.

In “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” readers follow Huck’s journey as he grapples with societal expectations and personal morality, especially regarding his friendship with Jim, an escaped enslaved person. Huck’s moral conflicts, as he questions society’s views on slavery and follows his own sense of justice, prompt readers to reflect on ethical issues and the importance of standing up for what is right.



WHERE TO FIND LIVING BOOKS



When first starting to use living books, choosing which titles will be most suitable can feel daunting. Remember, there is no “perfect” book—if you don’t find a particular suggested title, you aren’t going to fail your child! Many free curricula online offer living book lists by subject and year. Each curriculum or booklist may have its own focus and goals, so keep in mind that these may not always align exactly with your own as you look through various book lists.

AmblesideOnline – [amblesideonline.org](https://www.amblesideonline.org): A comprehensive, free Charlotte Mason-based curriculum with carefully curated living books for each subject and grade level.

Mater Amabilis – materamabilis.org: A Catholic-focused Charlotte Mason curriculum with an emphasis on living books that integrate Catholic values.

Stories of Color – storiesofcolor.com: Some incredible living book lists highlighting books by diverse authors from many cultures and perspectives. Lists are arranged by country, perspective, time period, grade, and more.

Wildwood Curriculum – wildwoodcurriculum.org: A secular Charlotte Mason curriculum with a strong emphasis on nature studies and inclusive, diverse perspectives.

Living Book Press – www.livingbookpress.com: A publisher dedicated to reviving classic living books, Living Book Press offers a diverse selection of titles across various subjects and age groups, making it easier to incorporate a living book education into your home.

Biblioguides – biblioguides.com: A website with a vast library of living book recommendations across various themes, subjects, and ages. While some book lists are free, others are behind a paywall.

SCM Bookfinder – apps.simplycharlottesmason.com/resources: A vast catalog containing over 1500 books arranged by subject and grade.



Facebook Groups

Living Books of All Peoples – facebook.com/groups/1959045184365402

A group dedicated to finding living books that reflect diverse cultures, allowing members to discuss, recommend, and share resources.

Reshelving Alexandria – facebook.com/groups/reshelvingalexandria

A group for book lovers to help them curate a home library full of living books.

THANK YOU



Using living books as part of your educational approach opens up a world of meaningful, engaging learning experiences. These books offer more than just information—they foster critical thinking, empathy, creativity, and a lasting love of knowledge that can enrich every aspect of a child's life. Remember, living books aren't about perfection or rigid adherence to a list; they're about creating connections with the material that resonate with both you and your children. Explore, experiment, and find what works best for your family.

As you embark on this journey, may you discover new perspectives, memorable stories, and the joy of shared learning through the rich, narrative-driven world of living books. Happy reading!