



# Book Selection

## WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA FOR WELL-READ MOM BOOKS?

Life is busy! For many women, mothers, in particular, personal reading is often viewed as a luxury that gets sacrificed to the busyness of daily life. So when we do make time to read, we want to be sure that we are participating in something good and beautiful. We desire to actively engage in an activity that seeks to open our moral imagination and lead us to truth. But what does this mean? And how do we know what books might fall into these categories and how can characters that seem to live lives that are anything but beautiful lead us to deep abiding truth?

Well-Read Mom has spent a great deal of time thinking about this and would like to share what we look for in our book selections with you.

### We look for tradition

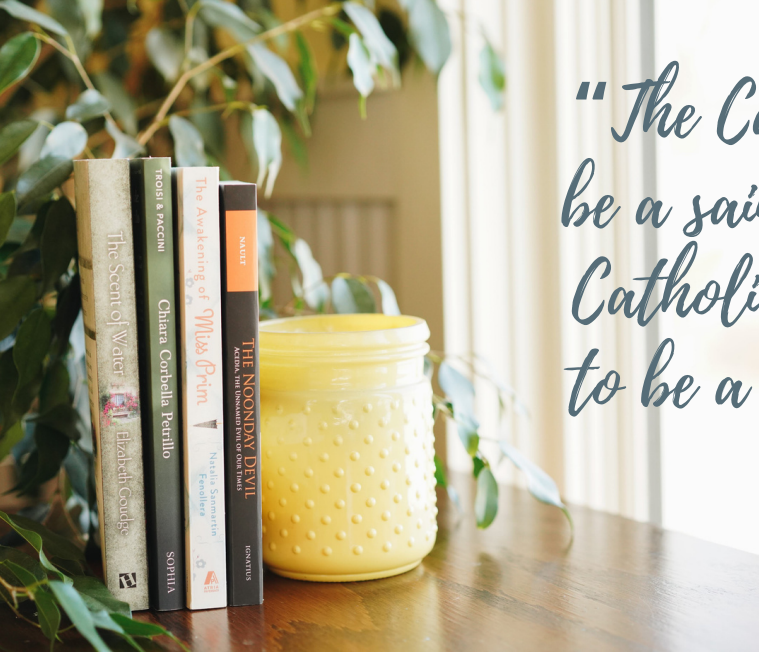
All around us, books that have **traditionally** been considered valuable and worth reading are being dismissed and replaced with other (often more contemporary) books of questionable quality. At WRM, we lean against this trend. Instead, we rely in great part upon “classic” books—“classic” understood in the broadest sense possible: books which tradition, great literary thinkers throughout the ages, time itself, have all elected as stand-out examples of literary excellence.

### We look for Humanity

We also seek to read **contemporary books** that illuminate the **human in some important way**. We're reading books that ask the questions enduring classics have asked for millennia: What is it to be human?

What are a human person's most fundamental needs? How do we live in a fallen world? How do we cope with death? What gives life meaning?





*"The Catholic novelist doesn't have to be a saint; he doesn't even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist." – Flannery O'Connor*

## We look as Art.

We ask ourselves, is it possible to interact with books that stretch us outside our comfort zone; books that include objectionable content, written by authors whose world-view, behavior, or experiences may at times diverge from what is virtuous and moral?

In her wry way, Flannery O'Connor notes that the artistic quality of a book—its integrity as art per se and its literary value—is separate from the author's faith and virtue (or lack thereof). The fictional novel (or short story, or drama) is a unique creation, distinct from catechesis and apologetics. O'Connor explains, "For the fiction writer himself, the whole story is the meaning because it is an experience, not an abstraction."

In fiction, meaning becomes incarnate via the complex tapestry of character, plot, theme, language, and setting. In this vein, WRM hopes to challenge women to experience literature that has integrity as meaningful, worthwhile art.

Pope St. John Paul II knew, from his own experience, that art has the potential to both reveal and inhabit the deepest parts of the human person – regions both resplendent and shadowed. Through art, we have a mediated way to confront those shadows, to begin to understand such struggles within ourselves, and to empathize with those who struggle with darkness and sin.

What is more, confronting these situations via literature, in a way that is slower than our day-to-day interactions with the world at large, gives us more room for contemplation and more time to consider how Christ brings to such situations both a challenge to **live virtue and an expanse of mercy** that can embrace and forgive even the most piercing sins.

*Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience... Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption." —Pope St. John Paul II*

## We look Into the Paradox.

The list of important, meaningful great books that have been censored goes on and on: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Animal Farm, Brideshead Revisited, The Grapes of Wrath, The Great Gatsby, The Lord of the Rings, To Kill a Mockingbird, and more. Little Women faced critics who thought it was immoral. Christian magazines told Sunday school librarians not to buy the book—the March family doesn't go to church on Christmas Day. If we closed ourselves off from every work of literature that mentioned sin or scandal, we'd even have to eliminate the Holy Bible, which features murder, suicide, adultery, and worse.

Literature reveals the paradoxical tension of the world to us: we live in a world that is both a "vale of tears" and a wellspring of God's graces, that are bestowed, at times, through the most surprising situations and people. We strive, love, and suffer in this world, yet always long for heaven: while "in" the



world, but not “of” it, we must, like the saints, enter into its battered beauty, knowing that God's goodwill triumph even in the midst of all this, and not in some imaginary land-without-sin that is not our own.

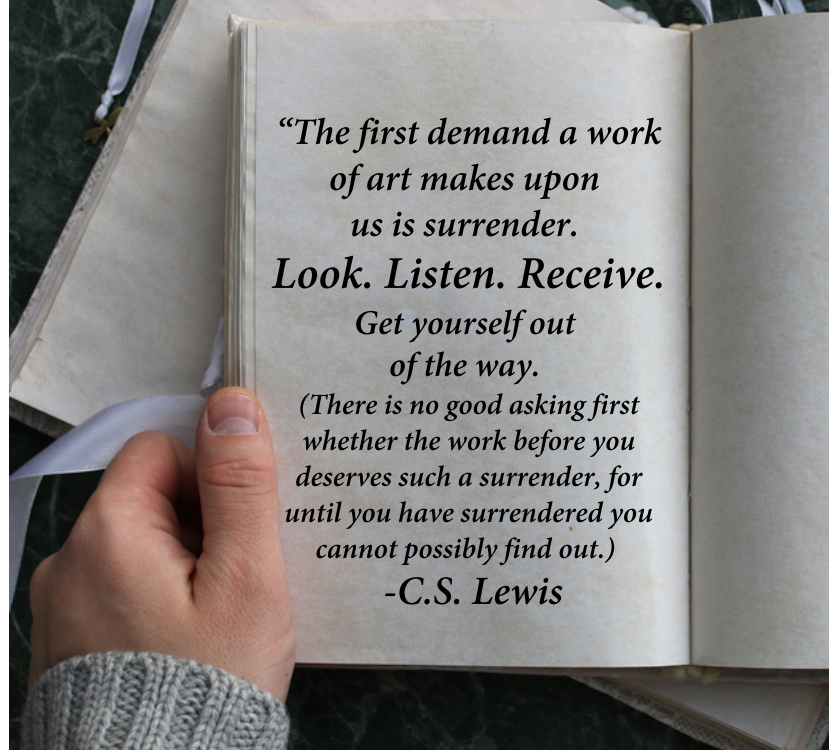
At the same time, it is important to realize we do not encourage reading books that glamorize evil or fail to see evil as evil. Dorian Gray, for example, is no moral exemplar. Still, throughout the novel, the narrator pushes us as readers to recognize how even Dorian's life, as dark as it was, could have been redeemed had he chosen to accept God's mercy or recognized his need for salvation.

## IF IT IS APPROPRIATE TO READ THESE BOOKS, HOW SHOULD WE READ THEM?

### We read with humility.

It is important to note the words “work of art” in the above suggestion from C.S. Lewis. He is not referring to fluff, smut, or worse—he's referring to a creation that has integrity within itself as art. To accept the work as it is, we may be challenged to visit or inhabit realms that are less comfortable for us. We must read from a position of humility rather than a position of judgmental suspicion.

There is a commonsense caveat to the surrender suggested by Lewis, of course. If, due to some particular vulnerability or wound, a reader can tell that a specific work of literature might be spiritually harmful to herself, she can, with proper self-knowledge and discernment, elect not to engage in this particular book. Her experience is valid, but it does not invalidate the importance of the experience of this work of art for others.



*“The first demand a work  
of art makes upon  
us is surrender.*

***Look. Listen. Receive.***

*Get yourself out  
of the way.*


*(There is no good asking first  
whether the work before you  
deserves such a surrender, for  
until you have surrendered you  
cannot possibly find out.)*

***-C.S. Lewis***

### We read with confidence.

In WRM, we have a particular method for reading books: read, compare, share and accompany. We read the story that is given to us. We compare this story against our own life experiences. Often in discussions, new ideas or insights will be shared and explored that make us see the work in an entirely new way. This is a valuable enterprise! Through community, we are supported as we enter into the experience in a deeper way. Then, we accompany each other—we help each other live the new experience we have been given.

It is crucial for women to be educated deeply in what it is to be human. At times, this may mean staring evil in the face, as we did in “The Picture of Dorian Gray.” We do this not because Dorian is an exemplar of human behavior but to recognize how sin distorts humanity. We need to see. We need to look at humanity's terrible distortions head-on to be able to see ourselves more clearly. If we cannot see how distorted we all have become, we will never be able to enter into the mystery of the Prodigal Son and Father. We cannot, in truth, beg to rest our head on the Father's breast as the tattered, repentant sinner we know we are.



*"The educational method with the greatest capacity for good is not the one that flees from reality in order to affirm what is good separately, but rather the one that lives by advocating for the triumph of good in the world" —Servant of God Luigi Giussani*

At Well-Read Mom, we do not seek to read works that glorify a sinful life, but rather ones that illuminate our deepest need, our need for a savior to enter into our lives and claim it. Just as Christ didn't turn away from the wounded Samaritan woman at the well, knowing well the scandalous behavior that shadowed her past and her present, we cannot circle our wagons of virtue and close ourselves off from the world's flaws—primarily because the most pernicious brokenness dwells not outside our front door, but within the home of our hearts.

In Well-Read Mom, women read more and read well. We desire to deepen the awareness of meaning hidden in each woman's daily life, elevate the cultural conversation, and revitalize reading literature from books. If you would like to have us help you select worthy reading material, we invite you to join and read along with us. We are better together!

In WRM, we hope to read deeply human works of literature without fear and challenge ourselves to stand before reality without editing anything away. At times, we are called to witness the terrible reality of a life lived without Christ—not to glorify sin, but to illuminate our deepest need and to see how deeply we require a savior to enter into all of our lives. Salvation through Christ's love is possible when one first recognizes a need for it.

## **We read with honesty.**

The books we read with Well-Read Mom challenge us to stand before reality without editing anything away. The wounds of Christ remained in his risen body, allowing his glorified body to bear the marks of the brokenness which expressed his love. The books we read bear the wounds of the world, that we might enter into them and discover our brokenness and that of others because such knowledge is the gateway to God's mercy.

*"A wound, if you think about it, is an occasion when what is within us is exposed, when the life-blood is poured out and becomes accessible to others. In Christ's case, what is within him is love, the Holy Spirit. The places where human sins inflicted pain on him are the very places where, because that pain was accepted on our behalf and for our sake, Christ's love was most fully expressed."*

—Stratford Caldecott