



# FAIRHAVEN BOOK REVIEW

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## CHOOSING "GOOD BOOKS" FOR CHILDREN

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### INTRODUCTION

One request I receive more than any other as a librarian and literature teacher is for recommendations on good books, especially books for young people. Years ago, this question prompted me to evaluate for myself what I read and would allow my own children to read. What is a "good book"? Which books would I recommend and from which books would I withhold my recommendation? I began doing something only a true "book nerd" would do: I read books about books. Believe it or not, there are a lot of them! And every one has a different opinion about what content is acceptable and what should be avoided, which authors must be read and which should be shunned, which genres are profitable and which ones should not be part of a Christian's library.

As a result, I've come up with a few guidelines for choosing books for young people. To illustrate each of these, I'll be using a great little book for 7-9 year-olds, *Nix* by Penny McKnight. This book tells the true story of a destitute little boy named Nicholas Blake, "Nix," growing up in poverty-riddled Jamaica. When his mother tires of his disobedience, she threatens to send him to a juvenile detention facility far from home. Nix tries to be good and obey his mother so she won't send him away, but it seems like trouble and anger follow him. The story follows Nix as he learns that God loves sinners, just like him. Through this little story, I hope you can see a few characteristics of what constitutes a "good book" and apply these to other stories for yourself.

### ASSESSMENT

- First of all, in the course of the story, good should be rewarded and evil should be punished. In much of modern literature, especially juvenile literature, the "good" characters are portrayed as inept, bumbling morons, and are contrasted with the refined, mysterious rebel. In the story of Nicholas Blake, applying this principle is tricky. The true "evil" in the story, Nix's mother, is never overtly "punished." In fact, the story ends with an author's note expressing Nix's desire to see his mother saved. However, the author offers a contrast between Nicholas and his mother. Nix truly wants to live righteously; he expresses a desire for God to love him, to care for him, even before he truly understands the gospel message. This holy desire is answered by his being brought into the protection of the missionaries' home and hearing the gospel. As the light of salvation changes Nix's life, his circumstances are changed as well. Nicholas's mother, however, continues in her sin and is never relieved of her poverty or the burden of anger she bears. This "evil" is punished in its own right, illustrating Isaiah 48:22, "There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked." Her portrayal of the "evil" in the story is made to be repulsive, unattractive to even the most simple eye.
- In addition, the sympathetic character – the one with whom the reader is meant to empathize – should be noble. Nix is far from noble at the onset of the story; he is disrespectful, rebellious, and cannot control

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his anger; he displays an overall attitude of rebellion against the God offered by the missionaries. However, once presented with the truth of a loving God, Nix confesses his sin and accepts Christ as his Savior. He understands God wants him to love and obey his mother, no matter how unjustly she treats him. He spends weeks learning to read so that he can learn to hide God's Word in his heart. He willingly works difficult, physical labor to earn the money needed to go to school. Even though it took time for Nix to become noble, it was Christ's saving power which made him so.

- Many, if not most, stories may include questionable elements. For example, in the beginning of our story, Nix displays a rebellious attitude towards his parents and an ungodly response to life's circumstances. Nix's mother, too, displays a worldly, sinful attitude towards her children, at the least complaining to his older sister about Nix's bad behavior and expressing her desire to send him away, and at her worst, allowing anger to control her to the point of brandishing a knife at her own child. But a "good book" will deal with this and other types of dubious content in a biblical way. Nix's rebellion is eventually confessed and forsaken, replaced by gratitude. His mother's unnatural disdain for her children is never eradicated, but Nix is taught by the loving guidance of the missionary how to forgive. The story leaves Nix protected from the results of her sin. In a "good book," the "evil"—whether the boys' fistfight or the mother's shameless physical abuse—isn't there to intrigue or fascinate; it is there in an age-appropriate measure, for a specific purpose. In our story, the representation of evil is meant to purposely show a contrast between a life directed by the flesh and for self and one submitted to the love of Christ and obedient to His will.
- Overall, the story should teach biblical principles, and those messages should be clear and forthright, not implied and ambiguous. Nix learns that releasing his anger and frustration by vandalizing the missionaries' house won't satisfy his rage. Nix's misguided belief that it is the missionaries' wealth that makes them special is replaced by the understanding that it is God Who sets them apart. Nix learns in the face of misunderstood intentions to rely on God's Word for comfort and trust in His plan for his own future. Alone and unjustly jailed, instead of fighting against his dire circumstances as he had at the beginning of the story, Nix submits his will to God's.

## CONCLUSION

- Of course, this example and explanation are not exhaustive. If you're interested, I've included a few resources at the end of this article that are much more detailed and more eloquently stated. And I would never discount the parents' need to prayerfully guide their own children, in the time appropriate for their own spiritual betterment, in their choice of reading material. If parents can gain anything from this review, it would be that your children should be reading God-honoring books and that you should be vigilantly aware of what they are reading.

## RESOURCES

- **Best Books** compiled by Donna Hess, published by Bob Jones University Press
- **Nix** by Penny McWright
- Sermon: "Bring the Books" by Pastor Dan Armacost - <https://youtu.be/I8DCFaZ-A1M>