

# Literary Spectrum

## The Adolescent Author

*You are 16... or 18... You love to write. You have kept a journal or a diary for years. You have pen pals in a dozen states and three provinces. You have a collection of books about writing prominently displayed on your bookshelf. You attend every writer's workshop that comes along. You love words.*

*You even love to read about writing. When the Vineyard Laborer lands in your mailbox you grab it, turn right to the Literary Spectrum and devour it from end to end. Then you sit back with a sigh. If only you could be a writer...*

*In fact, though you might not admit it, your favorite daydream is writing a book that will change someone's life. When you read a touching account, you feel that almost nothing in life is as worthwhile as being able to put words on paper that penetrate all the way to a reader's heart.*

*You are young and ambitious. You don't mind hard work. You have a dozen, or more, good ideas that you would love to put on paper. You are eager to get to work, but they say you are too young. They tell you to wait until you have more experience—until you understand life better. Your parents need your help right now. They need the money your labor brings in.*

*I can picture you this evening as I sit at my desk—out in the garden pulling weeds and swatting mosquitoes—thinking of writing and longing to be sitting at your desk.*

*Welcome to the world of the adolescent author!*

## Adolescent Authors and Parents

Judging from the mail I get, most young would-be authors are girls (if you are a boy, the same concepts apply). Most teenage girls have lots to do already. They mow the lawn, they weed the garden, they baby sit, they teach Sunday School, they help married sisters with babies, and they do the house cleaning, they do chores, or they help in the family business. It seems everything takes priority over writing.

But what if you feel that the Lord wants you to be a writer? When can you get enough spare time to cultivate the talents He has given you? How can you spend four hours at a stretch writing, like a former Literary Spectrum essay recommended?

These questions are real. It has been a while since I was your age (my bigger problem now is finding ways to get away from writing). But I do have a daughter who is peaking around the corner from adolescence to adulthood. She faced some of those same questions because, for some strange reason, she likes to write. In this case I was the father who saw other work that she could be doing at times. So I have some sympathy for your parents, as well as for you.

If you are a budding teenage writer, you need the cooperation and goodwill of your parents. Most Christian parents are genuinely interested in the spiritual and

mental development of their children. I would suggest that you sit down with your parents and share your aspirations of being a writer with them. There is a good possibility that they will find a way to free up a slot of your time to do some writing.

If they can't give you some free time—or just simply refuse—then you may need to shelve your dreams a bit longer. Your time belongs to your parents at your age. But that doesn't mean that you need to give up completely. Keep on writing in your journal. Write letters. Do some good reading, if you have time. Study your Sunday school lesson. Listen carefully to your minister's sermons and follow his logic as he develops his train of thought. Carry a notebook and write down good ideas when they come to you. There are many ways to develop your mental muscle, and all of them will be helpful when you finally do get to the place where you can do more writing.

## **Adolescent Authors and Experience**

Teenagers tend to have lots of get up and go. They want to do things, and do them now, not five years from now. But writers do need some experience as well as zeal and imagination. So in a sense the practical people who say you are too young have a point. Yet, in another sense, practical people don't always have all the answers. Anyway, you do have some experience—you have just come through the intermediate years.

You probably have some pretty vivid recollections of your struggles with life in general when you were barely a teenager. Remember your first pimples? Remember when your pet dog or cat died? Remember the horrible nights when you laid awake because you were afraid you would die before morning and you knew you weren't ready to die? You can work your experience into stories for younger children and intermediates and get some good practice at the same time.

In the meantime, pay attention to what is happening around you. Why does Ben have such a hard time getting along with his parents? Why does Susie get along with everyone so well? Why can't Phoebe stick to her work? What makes Grandpa Martin such an interesting person to be with? Watch the characters around you, and the interesting dilemmas they get into. Jot your thoughts down in your journal. Someday, your notes will make a good resource.

Writers must learn to evaluate their environment and the people in it. Now is your chance, so pay attention!

## **What About Writer's Groups?**

Many avid young writers are discovering writer's groups, and they are becoming quite popular. Should you join one of these? Or two or three, as some young folks are?

My reaction at this point is a bit mixed. The basic premise of a writer's group is good. Everyone does some writing, then they send it around and criticize each other's work. Then they revise their work and do it again. Most such groups have deadlines that keep you writing, and the experience of writing and criticizing is good.

My basic concern is that too much of this whole exercise is done just for the fun of it. I remember a writing class that I taught in Bible school. Some of my students were terrific writers. Yet most of them just wrote for the fun of it. One of the most

talented students in the class even refused to write the test when he discovered that it would mean doing some actual work (he changed his mind later)!

If your writer's group is promoting writing that glorifies God rather than you, then I don't have a problem with it. I would recommend, however, that you include someone older in the group to provide a balance. I would also recommend that your goal is to have every group member produce some publishable writing within a certain length of time. If a story is rejected, pass it and the editor's criticisms on to the group so that all of you can learn from it.

If you can, try to include someone who understands what publishers expect in the group . That could save you a lot of time. In fact, I think our publishers should make a few writers and editors available to help with groups like that. I know that there are lots of you out there that would make good writers with a bit of encouragement.

### **Keep Writing!**

Sometimes teenage writers lose interest as they get more involved with life. My daughter now teaches school, which is great. She teaches some terrific composition classes, which is also great. But she doesn't do very much writing any more, which is not so great. Don't let that happen to you. Keep up your interest and enthusiasm. Don't let writing just become a passing phase of your life.

You will become busier yet than you are now. Someday, not so far away, you will look wistfully back at your teenage years as the golden time of your life. Do now what you will have to do then. Prioritize. Evaluate how you use your time. Cut out fun and leisure in exchange for writing time. The experience will do you good.

By the way, I haven't given up on my daughter yet. One of these times you'll see a story in the Vineyard Laborer that she wrote. I hope to see one of your stories there too!