

# Good Reader Can Have More Lives Than A Cat

By MARION RENICK



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**C**OMPARE PEOPLE with cats and advantages can be seen on both sides. From a two-legged viewpoint the big advantage on kitty's side is those nine lives she is supposed to have. As for cats, if they think about it at all, they wouldn't give the twitch of a whisker for a certain human advantage called reading.

Yet a child who learns to read will never have to stop with a measly cat's-worth of nine lives. For reading is the way by which people can live 99 different

lives, or a thousand and nine, or as many more as there are books on the library shelves.

Or perhaps not quite that many for not all books have the power to bring an extra life to a reader. Yet the ones which do are the only ones worth spending time with, unless the reader is concerned with facts and figures and finding-out-how. Such books as those are necessary enough in themselves to be worth all the effort that civilized nations spend in getting their girls and boys to read.

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But such books only answer questions and fill some empty spaces in our minds. They do not put us inside skins other than our own. They do not carry us to other times and places.

Children feel the difference even before they have mastered the words. Small fry read to at bedtime often fall asleep in the role of Pooh Bear. Or they come to breakfast perhaps as Peter Rabbit, hopping about the house in rabbitly abandon.

Their elders, looking on, speak with a smile of the childish imagination. They give no credit to the transforming power of books.

Oddly enough, this power is seldom mentioned as a serious reason why children should learn to read. Youngsters have to discover it for themselves. When they do, they keep still about it. They just sit there quietly — this in itself is evidence of rare magic! — apparently reading a book.

But under its magical spell they may be landing on an unknown planet, or quarterbacking a football team, or acting before television cameras or riding the range on a pinto pony. With another book on another day they can live some other life in some other identity.

Vicarious experience is one name for this. Escapism is another. And how

fortunate are all readers, to have such a handy means of escaping from the tight world around them into the unlimited many-lived world of the imagination.

This is what the best of books can do. In them a reader can meet people more able and of higher courage than himself. He can catch a spark of their ambition or be cheered by their good humor. Seeing how they solve their problems, he can learn how to cope better with his own.

Of course all this depends upon the book, and for that reason places a grave obligation on its writer. He must fashion his story in such a way that young readers can move into it as hero or heroine. He must make it so real that they feel their blood tingle with excitement, their anger flare at injustice, their spines stiffen with determination as they live their printed-page personality.

Also the author must give them something of value to bring back to their everyday world—some insight for understanding it a bit better. Thus girls and boys who read the right books have the advantage of experiencing countless lives in many centuries. Even with a saucer of cream every day in all of those nine fabled lives, what cat ever had it so good?