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# What the Presidents Read

Childhood Stories and Family Favorites  
Edited by Elizabeth Goodenough and Marilyn  
S. Olson, Foreword by Ted Widmer

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### About the Book

A childhood book is much more than just a story—for the presidents, it may represent a turn in the course of history. *What the Presidents Read* catalogs presidents' early reading accompanied by commentary from eye-witness reporters, historians, journalists, curators, biographers, literary scholars, U.S. presidents and White House families. Together they offer non-specialists brief, surprising insights. Readers will jump at the chance to compare their own favorite books as they learn how these publications resonated with national myths and leaders in the making.

### About the Authors

**Elizabeth Goodenough** has taught at Harvard, Claremont McKenna, Sarah Lawrence Colleges, and at the University of Michigan's Residential College, School of Education, and School of Information.

**Marilynn Olson** was associate editor and then-editor of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* from November of 1991 through spring of 2000.

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## Praise

“Perhaps nothing more profoundly influences an individual than the books read in childhood. America has been blessed with readers who became our leaders. Goodenough and Olson have done a great service. Their remarkable book ambitiously sets out to prove how deeply children’s literature has helped shape the minds and souls of those who have guided our nation through war and peace. And I for one am grateful for it.”

- Michael Patrick Hearn, author of *The Annotated Wizard of Oz*

“Brilliantly conceived, comprehensive in its contents, and fun to read, *What the Presidents Read* is a rich blend of biography, history, literature, and psychology that explores the idea that -- even for presidents -- we are what we read. The sheer human interest of this book is irresistible, while students of history may gain new insights into the presidents they admire. Highly recommended!”

- James G. Basker, Richard Gilder Professor of Literary History, Barnard College, Columbia University

“This volume invites us to consider what reading is for, as well as who has access to its offerings and who does not. It is instructive to learn what the presidents read in their childhood and what books they still treasure as adults. With a reach both wide and deep, this literary and pictorial quilt stitches many connections among presidents, books, children, and the people who came to define a nation.”

- Pamela Reynolds, Anthropology of Childhood, Professor Emerita Johns Hopkins University, Presidential Professor University of Michigan

“In their insightful book, *What the Presidents Read*, Elizabeth Goodenough and Marilyn Olson investigate how children’s tales are a key part of the story of leadership and values for our American presidents. The originality of their concept is both powerful and enchanting.”

- Chris Loker, author of *One Hundred Books Famous in Children’s Literature*

“*What the Presidents Read: Childhood Stories and Family Favorites* is a must-read for anyone interested in how literature shaped American presidents as people and as leaders.”

- Catherine Sommervold, Professor of Education, Doane University

“*What the Presidents Read* is a well-researched and engaging text that provides insight into the reading habits of U.S. presidents and their families.”

- James Conroy, author of *Lincoln’s White House*