

= Children and Television : Lessons from Sesame Street =

Children and Television : Lessons from Sesame Street (1974) is a non-fiction book written by Gerald S. Lesser , in which he describes the production of Sesame Street , and the formation and pedagogical philosophy of the Children 's Television Workshop . Lesser was a professor at Harvard University , studying how social class and ethnicity interacted with school achievement and was one of the first academics in the US who researched how watching television affected children and their development . He was initially skeptical about the potential of using television as a teaching tool , but he was eventually named as the advisory board chairman of the Children 's Television Workshop (CTW) , the organization created to oversee the production and research of Sesame Street , and was the show 's first educational director . Lesser wrote the book early in Sesame Street 's history , to evaluate the show 's effectiveness , to explain what its writers , researchers , and producers were attempting to do , and to respond to criticism of Sesame Street .

Children and Television has four sections , " A Proposal " , " Planning " , " Broadcasting " and " Lessons from Sesame Street " . The book also has a preface and an epilogue , written by Lesser , a foreword written by co-creator Joan Ganz Cooney , and an introduction by co-creator Lloyd Morrisett . Scattered throughout the book are cartoons drawn by children 's author Maurice Sendak . Lesser describes the origin and development of Sesame Street and his part in it . He also describes the research involved in the show 's creation and production .

= = Background = =

Gerald S. Lesser was the Biglow Professor of Education and Developmental Psychology at Harvard University . He studied how social class and ethnicity interacted with school achievement and was one of the first academics in the US who researched how watching television affected children and their development . In 1963 , he served as an academic adviser for the NBC educational program , Exploring . In 1968 , Sesame Street co-creator Lloyd Morrisett , whom he had met as a student at Yale University , asked Lesser to assist with the research of a new children 's show he and producer Joan Ganz Cooney were developing , a show that eventually became Sesame Street .

Lesser was initially skeptical about the potential of using television as a teaching tool , but he was eventually named as the advisory board chairman of the Children 's Television Workshop (CTW) , the organization created to oversee the production and research of Sesame Street , and was the show 's first educational director . He was also skeptical about Cooney 's qualifications as CTW 's first director , but Cooney later stated , " ... I couldn't begin to measure how proud I am to be Gerry Lesser 's colleague and how happy I am to know the pleasure of his company " .

In the summer of 1968 , under what Sesame Street researchers Edward Palmer and Shalom Fisch called Lesser 's " able leadership " , five three-day curriculum planning seminars were conducted in Boston . The purpose of the seminars , attended by educational experts and the new show 's writers and producers , was to ascertain which school preparation skills to emphasize . According to writer Michael Davis , Lesser 's skills at encouraging collegiality were evident during the seminars . Writer Louise Gikow reported that the real friction occurred between the educators present . As Sesame Street songwriter Christopher Cerf reported , " ... [Lesser] ran meetings better than anyone I 've ever seen . He made everybody feel like they were important , that they got listened to , and that their work ended up in the final product " . Davis noted that the seminars also served as a " crash course in child development , psychology , and preschool education " for the show 's producers and writers . According to researcher Robert W. Morrow , Lesser understood that in order to bring research about child development into the production process of Sesame Street , a close working relationship had to be created between the researchers and the producers . Davis credited Lesser 's " informal , unpretentious , and collaborative " manner with the creation of that close relationship .

As head of research on Sesame Street , Lesser came up with what he called " the CTW model " . This model included having assumptions about how children learn from television , the use of high

@-@ quality production values , and establishing " an organization that fostered mutual confidence among its members " . Field research testing the effectiveness of each episode 's content was conducted at preschools , prior to broadcast . The show 's educational goals were measured after each episode aired to further evaluate the show 's effectiveness .

Lesser wrote *Children and Television* in 1974 , early in the show 's history , to evaluate the effectiveness of the CTW model , to explain what the show 's writers , researchers , and producers were attempting to do , and to respond to criticism of *Sesame Street* . Lesser also explained the show 's logic , its curriculum , and its pedagogy . Writer Robert W. Morrow called Lesser 's book " *Sesame Street 's most adept defense* " . According to Morrow , *Children and Television* was the most complete explanation of the CTW 's reasoning behind the show at the time , and a memoir of the show 's development .

= = Synopsis = =

Children and Television has four sections , " A Proposal " , " Planning " , " Broadcasting " and " Lessons from *Sesame Street* " . The book also has a preface and an epilogue , written by Lesser , a foreword written by Joan Ganz Cooney , and an introduction by Lloyd Morrisett . Scattered throughout the book are cartoons drawn by children 's author Maurice Sendak , who attended the 1968 seminars .

Lesser begins his book by describing the origin of *Sesame Street* and his part in it . He had been studying child development and how its concepts could be used to teach children ; since 1961 , he studied children 's reaction to television and whether or not the medium could be used to teach them . In 1966 , he was approached by Cooney and Morrisett to assist them in creating the new show 's educational objectives and research goals , and he agreed despite his misgivings about the effectiveness of television as a teaching tool .

Sesame Street 's audience included any child in the country who wished to watch it , but Lesser reports that the producers ' original purpose was to reach the poor children of America . Lesser states , " If the series did not work for poor children , the entire project would fail " . He is critical of the American public school system , and blames its failure to educate children on the lack of defined goals . When he wrote *Television and Children* , most American children received no preschool education . The first two chapters of the book detail the reasons for the experiment of creating an educational television program like *Sesame Street* , especially in regards to its audience .

" Grownups never seem to understand anything by themselves , and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them " .

Antoine de Saint @-@ Exupéry , *The Little Prince* .

Gerald Lesser used this quote to begin the second section of *Children and Television* . He introduced many of his sections and chapters with pertinent quotes .

Lesser opens the section on " Planning " by relating how many of the cast and crew were recruited : executive producer David Connell , producer Sam Gibbon , head writer Jon Stone , producer and writer Matt Robinson , Jim Henson , composer Joe Raposo , and actors Loretta Long , Bob McGrath , and Will Lee . Lesser also recounts the process of hiring head researcher Edward L. Palmer and those involved with community outreach . The producers of the new show spent eighteen months planning , something that was unprecedented in children 's television . Lesser extensively describes the series of curriculum seminars that took place at Harvard University and in New York City in the summer of 1968 .

These chapters outline the philosophy behind *Sesame Street* . The show 's creators made assumptions about teaching and held the unconventional view that learning can be unintentional and enjoyable . Finally , they decided that although *Sesame Street* was set in an urban setting , they would avoid depicting more negativity than what was already present in the child 's environment . Lesser states , " With all its raucousness and slapstick humor , *Sesame Street* became a sweet show , and its staff maintains that there is nothing wrong in that " .

The researchers developed a " *Writer 's Notebook* " for the show 's writers and producers to serve as a bridge between curriculum goals and script development . Lesser connects the show 's

production techniques ? including the use of music , humor (especially slapstick humor) , and animation ? with educational goals . Lesser emphasizes the importance of characters , both human and Muppet , to sustain children 's attention . According to Lesser , Sesame Street combines four elements to sustain attention : Muppets , the cast of live adults and children on the set , animation , and live @-@ action film .

According to Lesser , before the creation of Sesame Street , children 's reactions to educational television was ignored ; this marked the first time that they were studied to evaluate and improve the show 's content and efficacy . Lesser reports that approximately 10 @-@ 15 percent of the CTW 's initial two @-@ year budget of \$ 8 million was spent on research . He relates the priorities for pre @-@ production research , which he called " summative evaluation " . Using outside research groups like the Educational Testing Service (ETS) , the Workshop wanted to ascertain if watching the show made any difference . They were particularly interested in comparing the show 's effect on children from different socio @-@ economic groups , and if viewing conditions affected its effectiveness .

Lesser states , " This became the first time in television 's 25 @-@ year history that child @-@ watching was systematically applied over a sustained period to the design of a televised series for children " . Lesser describes the new methods researcher Edward Palmer created to study the effects Sesame Street had on its young viewers ; for example , the " distractor " , in which a slide projector was placed next to a television set and adjusted to change slides every eight seconds . The researchers recorded when children in their study moved their attention away from the television to the projector , and the data collected were analyzed . Segments were removed based upon the information gathered . " This was the first time in television 's history that the children themselves would be listened to with care as a television series for them was designed and broadcast " , Lesser states .

Lesser begins the section on " Broadcasting " relating the origin of the show 's name . As he puts it , " ... We were forced to select the name we all liked the least " . Lesser reports that the show 's premiere on November 10 , 1969 was met with a large amount of acclaim and good reviews , but there were some negative reviews and criticism , which he recounts and addresses in great detail in the chapter entitled " Criticism " . He includes the criticism of approximately thirty groups and individuals , and demonstrates the essence and range of their arguments .

Lesser describes the research about the long @-@ term effect of Sesame Street . He reports that the show was watched by three to four million viewers by the middle of its first season , and breaks down the viewership into categories . According to Lesser , ratings remained consistently high . Lesser also describes the testing used by ETS , which found positive differences after the first three weeks of the show 's first season . They found that the children who watched the most learned the most .

The final section of Lesser 's book , " Lessons from Sesame Street " , summarizes what the creators and researchers were attempting to do . As Lesser states , " Here is Sesame Street 's main lesson : It deliberately uses television to teach without hiding its educational intentions and yet it attracts a large and devoted audience of young children from all parts of the country " .

= = Reviews = =

Terry Barrett of Ohio State University calls Children and Television a " serious book " , something that could be read by the general public without compromising the field of education . Barrett also calls the book an informative treatment of an " interesting contemporary educational phenomenon " . Joan Tierney of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation calls the book " a well @-@ thought , well @-@ organized historical version " of the early history and development of Sesame Street . She not only considers the book a " how @-@ to " in how to create and produce a children 's television show , but also an important exposure to the public the hard work and dedication it required to put it on the air . For Tierney , the most interesting part of the story Lesser tells in the book is how people with strong and different opinions and temperaments learned to work together and to give television " a little bit of class " . She applauds Lesser for including the CTW 's detractors , but believes that he

unnecessarily included the more ridiculous criticisms in order to give Sesame Street and the Workshop more credibility . Rose K. Goldsen of Cornell University criticizes Lesser for legitimizing " the strange folk belief that depositing lore in a child 's head is the same as educating a child " . She criticizes the research Lesser describes in the book , and insists that it should be considered as product @-@ testing rather than educational research . She also criticizes Lesser for legitimizing consumerism .

Ellen Wartella of Northwestern University called Children and Television a " profound book " that greatly influenced the field of children and media . She said that it was the first book in the U.S. that established the idea that children and television could be studied from a developmental perspective , that academics could be involved in the production of educational television programs , and that " children 's development and our understanding of children 's development could be important in the creation of media products " . The book also had a profound effect how later research has been conducted , and has been cited in hundreds of studies and books .