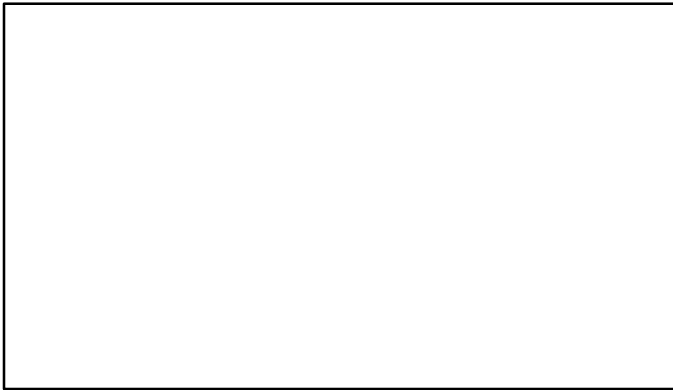


ENTERING THE LAND OF BOOKS

By Laura Mezirka



Bringing children into the land of books goes beyond teaching them phonics and bribing, coaxing or forcing them to do some reading. We must show them by our example that there is much to be gained from reading, and we must help them find the books that make them want more.

First, find the time to read. It has been easy for many of us to get out of the habit. Life is full of chores and challenges. In what little free time we have, we want to get together with friends, to catch up on projects around the house, and at the end of a long day, the television waits to give us an hour of relaxation. I've read somewhere that an entire hour of evening news on TV can fit on the front page of a newspaper. Sitting down with a book can allow us to get an in-depth look at a subject.

Next, we read to our children. Every family finds its own favorites. For picture books, I think you must use the public library because quality picture books are an investment. I was miserable when I had bought *Animalia* and then found my child indifferent to its charms. When you find the winner for your family, then you buy it. *Where is Josephine?* was such a winner at our house.

You need not restrict yourself to picture books, even for young children. Stories or poems without pictures can appeal to any child who knows most of the words used in them. Experience with no-picture stories also

develops the imagination. A must-have book with minimal illustration is *Stories for Under Five Year Olds*. There are sequels for five-year-olds, six year olds and so on. Jack Prelutsky's collection of *Read Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young* is another buy recommendation.

Story telling without books serves the same purpose. Small children thrill to stories about what mommy and daddy did when they were little. Imaginary stories made up about a child very much like mine were great winners at our house until I realized that I was expected to come up with a new one three hundred and sixty-five times every year.

Find books you enjoy, too. If *Goodnight Moon* makes you gag, try something else. My sister loved the award-winning books of Leo Lionni. I didn't. I may have enjoyed William Steig's books (*Dr. DeSoto, Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, The Amazing Bone, The Zabajaba Jungle etc.*) more than my child did. Her dad liked the James Stevenson books (*Grandpa's Too Good Garden, Are We There Yet, etc.*) I would also recommend John Steptoe (*My Daddy is a Monster... Sometimes and No, Baby, No*).

Check out the non-fiction shelves. The youngest children want to learn all about the world around them: Animals, how things are made (the Woodland library had a colorful photo book about how bubble gum is made!). Before the *Magic School Bus* series, Joanna Cole wrote some great books about puppies, kittens, and bugs. There are books about most things that happen to children: going to the hospital, new babies in the house, the death of a grandparent, divorce, bullies at school, moving, changing schools.

Do not neglect your own reading material. When my daughter was a pre-reader, I shared with her a story from the Wall Street Journal about a cargo ship that sank, losing its cargo of rubber duck toys. The rubber ducks began floating on the currents and their travels were followed by those interested in where the ocean's currents would take them. Keep an eye out while you

read the paper for stories about your neighborhood, your job, the schools or parks.

As your child begins to read, please remember that this requires real effort, which should be rewarded with a good story. Given a choice between an interesting book with slightly more difficult words, and an easy book with a boring story, I would choose the more interesting book.

Many children's books now feature a "reading level" on the back cover, designated as RL 2.9, RL 4.5 and so forth. These numbers represent school grade levels. They indicate only the level of reading skill required, not whether or not the material is suitable for the age group. There are books written to appeal to older children's interests within the lower reading skills books. If you don't want your third grader developing a precocious interest in dating and make-up, or gore and violence, look beyond the reading level.

One thing to consider is if the characters in children's books provide good role models. Is the story a good guys/bad guys competition or is there some good in each character? Do the characters tackle the really hard stuff: admitting when they are wrong, changing their mind if necessary? I personally find the children in the Goosebumps series to be mean-spirited and irresponsible. While Bruce Coville's books (*My teacher is an Alien, An Alien Ate My Homework, The Skull of Truth, etc.*) are slightly more challenging reading, they are much richer stories.

I read an interesting section in a book (which I now regret not buying and don't remember the title or author of) which addressed the propaganda implicit in children's books. You have to be ready to make your own call on these issues. I happen to believe in being a "control freak" to the extent of knowing what our sons and daughters are being exposed to. If they leave a book around, take a look in it and see what's going on. While we may let them read it, we may also want to discuss some of the underlying messages. "Do you think women always need men or boys to take care of them? Can you think of a better way these children could have solved the problem? Do you think you will ever have to use violence? Do you know that most police officers rarely if ever draw their guns? Are the women in these books anything like the women you know in real life? Do you choose *your* friends because of their clothes and hairstyles?"

Children's librarians are underutilized resources available to you. They know what children like and can steer you to the better books. The librarian can help find the best books that match your child's interests and storybooks that tie in with school topics. Phone the library for the hours that the children's librarian will be in. Check with your child's school to see if you can meet with the school librarian for assistance.

You might also want to talk to the children's librarian by yourself if you are trying to help your child find books that speak to issues in their life. They will know the storybooks that tie in with issues you want to address with your children. They can tell you that *Monkey See, Monkey Do* not only addresses what trouble a little monkey can get into trying to imitate birds and fish, but deals very sweetly with the little monkey's feelings when a baby sister displaces him on mommy's front, drinking his milk.

The Library may be able to provide you with a list of award winning books. The best known awards are probably the Caldecott (illustrations) and Newberry. I find *Reading Rainbow* selections to be enjoyable, and they are widely available.

Bookstore clerks can also be helpful and knowledgeable in suggesting storybooks. Don't be afraid to ask. People who get into children's books love to share their knowledge.

Books can provide entertainment, escape, information, knowledge of the world beyond our everyday lives, and encourage new ways of looking at the things we already know. Bringing your children into this experience is a great gift to them.

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