

Not the Whole Story

Written by Jenni Person, BT Contributor
September 2018

Schoolkids get narrative excerpts, not actual books



It's September, everybody has started to sink back into the swing of school, and another chapter of the *Divine Comedy* of summer reading has closed.

Granted, summer reading is not nearly as problematic as summer math packets, or the work assigned over holiday breaks that interferes with re-energizing, family time, or actual said-holiday observance (school shouldn't involve religion, of course, but it should allow the freedom to practice any and all religions privately), but even so, summer reading is inanely ironic.

How about instilling the habit of reading and a relationship to literacy through year-round reading? As a matter of fact, how about abolishing *all* homework and requiring kids to journal about books all school year instead?

I am embarrassed to say that in my daughter's four years at her public magnet school -- supposedly centering on an advanced curriculum -- her classwork has only involved reading actual books a few times. Those instances include: in her Gifted elective; in her eighth-grade history class, in which an enlightened teacher used historical fiction; and just this past school year, post-testing at the end of ninth grade, when they read *Romeo & Juliet* (which my smart-ass kid decided not to read but passed the related quiz anyway, based of her extensive knowledge of *West Side Story*)

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). In all of her language arts classes since sixth grade, the teachers have consistently used textbook “readers” with narrative excerpts, instead of actual literature.

Then people wonder why kids don't read books. And everyone is busy blaming shortened attention spans on electronic devices, media, and games.

Meanwhile, that happens to be another ring in our family's Dantean plight. In a family that is made up 100 percent of legitimately diagnosed attentionally challenged people, the route from page one to “the end” is daunting. Like so many kids before them (including me), my kids' relationship to reading is feast or famine. They will anxiously run away from intimidating, endlessly worded pages, but if they happen upon a book that grabs them, they won't put it down, and they'll independently read everything else the author has written or a chunk of the genre.

Nonetheless, they go through life quoting books they've read -- including those from their earliest childhood -- always connecting the ideas and images to the world around them.

Frequently they will refer to one of the books we read them as kids in describing something from their day or to make a point. For example, while telling me about an adventure she had with a friend one day, my daughter recently referred to children's book characters as if they were friends of ours: “Y'know how the Kleins lived in the walls of that synagogue?” She was referring to *How Mindy Saved Hanukkah* by Eric Kimmel, a book she loved as a child about a family of tiny mouse-size people whose main life challenge was to avoid being attacked by the building cat whenever they ventured out for supplies.

Other examples of this are how she'll throw around claims of a lack of egalitarianism or due process in our parenting by comparing a situation to a dystopian feminist novel like *The Handmaid's Tale* (read before it was a TV series). Or she'll quote Holden Caulfield to underscore her feisty adolescent social commentary.

But do *not* recommend a title or suggest she read a book. The wrath will surge forth; an anti-reading diatribe will ricochet in a pointed treatise against the value of bound words. Summer reading, therefore, involving a required titled and an assignment proving not what

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ideas emerged, but how many pages have been read, is a chore rather than actual learning.

If schools truly valued literature and committed to using *actual* books in curriculum, imagine how this generation's relationship to it would shift, would simply become matter-of-fact references in everyday life. Literature and literacy might seem important. Wouldn't it be great if kids didn't have tedious, regurgitative homework throughout the year so that they had more time to read and reflect? Imagine if reading were a habit resulting from experiencing it as a regular practice and cultural norm.

In the meantime, we are left with the wise words of Mark Twain: "Don't let schooling interfere with your education."

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A great pro-reading project to support in our community is Read to Learn Books for Free, a literacy initiative of Miami Book Fair in partnership with the Children's Trust, which distributes free kids' books. We donate the books our kids have outgrown to this effort, which involves stocking 55 bookshelves around Miami-Dade County -- in clinics and doctors' offices, juvenile court, parks, and community service centers -- providing every child who visits the shelves a free book to take home.

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