



**My Daughter is Reading, so Now What Do I Do?
A Book Review and Reflective Essay on Introducing
Novels to Children.**

—John J. Guiney Yallop

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The Context

I recall the night our daughter chose one of her many favourite books, Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever*, with the beautiful illustrations by Sheila McGraw, as the story she would read to us. While she certainly needed help with at least one word on just about every page, she did make it through. After reading the last page, she looked at it, then at us, and then back to the final page again. I could tell that she was aware of the milestone she had reached. She had read a whole book, a book that had more than a word, even more than a sentence, on each page, a book that previously she had only been able to listen to and look at as it was read to her, or to have as one of the five books in bed beside her (five being the arbitrary maximum I had agreed to, but to which I could not always hold) after story time. Now this book was accessible in ways it had not been before. In a way previously not possible, this book, this story, was now hers. It was an awesome moment as I saw the world of reading open up to my daughter, a world in which I have found so much pleasure, so much freedom, and so much power.

Our home is a text-rich environment. As a Ph.D. student who was an elementary-school educator for more than two decades and who currently teaches teacher candidates, I have brought an abundance of books into our home.

My partner, a gardener who takes a continuous-growth (pun intended) approach to his work, has a collection of resources from his studies. As well, his interest in Canadian history and literature has added a number of volumes to our collection. He is also the person who reads the most newspapers in our family. Our daughter, now eight years old as I write the final draft of this article, has always had a love of books. Whenever we leave the house, she carries a book. At night, after story time, she falls asleep with books by her side, often with a book in her hands. On weekend mornings, when reading newspapers can be done with a little more leisure, our daughter sometimes sits on the couch with her Papa and holds the newspaper as he does. I have also given our daughter some textbooks from my undergraduate degrees to prevent her from writing in her storybooks: having noticed me underlining in some of the resources I am using for my doctoral studies, she wanted to work on her Ph.D. like Daddy, and this, it appears, means underlining text.

As an elementary-school educator, I taught students from grades four to eight. While I worked with primary students in some capacities, I have not directly taught reading to very young students. Wanting to be proactive in building my daughter's reading capacity, when she started kindergarten I asked some colleagues who were primary-school



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educators for some suggestions as to what to do. I explained to my colleagues that, except for helping students for whom reading had been difficult and who required accommodations or modifications, something which I did in each year of my teaching, I had not taught students to read. I was stunned when, after glancing at each other for a second, they replied, almost in unison, “Neither have we.”

Their reply, perhaps intentionally, unsettled me because those two individuals provided the most literacy-rich classrooms I had seen in my more-than-twenty-year career as an elementary-school educator. I knew there was more to their comment and I asked them to explain. What I got was something that, surprisingly but gratefully, was much like a description of our home environment. Those two colleagues talked about providing a literacy-rich environment where books and other texts were read, where those texts were talked about, and where writing happened for diverse purposes. “Read to her. Read with her. Let her read to you,” they said. Were my colleagues telling me that my daughter would teach herself to read? The short answer is yes. But what about a parent’s

role? What about a teacher’s role? Was I feeling anxious about possibly being rendered irrelevant in personal and professional contexts?

My colleagues reminded me that children learn a great deal by observing. Children, at least young children, want to emulate their parents and other significant adults in their lives, such as teachers. When children see adults reading, reading becomes something important to do. Even what might appear to be an obvious task, such as holding a book (or a newspaper), needs to be learned, and is learned when children watch adults read. When children are read to, they gain an awareness of how stories can come from books, and how information can come from text. My daughter clearly had learned those things, but I am not aware of her ever being “taught” them. Now that I think of it, I am not aware of having been taught those things myself. I do, however, recall my mother, who left school in grade six, often reading the *Annals of St. Anne*, a religious magazine she received regularly from the Shrine of St. Anne de Beaupré in Québec, and my father, who left school in grade four, regularly reading the newspaper. I

recall reading my favourite childhood story, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, and I had a small collection of the series called *Big Little Books*. I also borrowed books from the Bookmobile that came to our community.

As well as reading texts, talking about texts is an important aspect of literacy. In our home, we often talk about the texts that we are reading. This talk typically happens before or after the reading, but can also happen during it. I used to discourage my daughter from interrupting reading when we were reading aloud, whether she was reading or being read to, because I felt that it was not polite to interrupt a story. I think this was a mixture of training and personal philosophy. I was taught that it isn't polite to interrupt, and I saw reading aloud as a performance and that the performer needed to complete the performance before questions could be asked. I have recently, however, felt uncomfortable with that stance because it constantly positions the opinions or questions of the reader or listener, in this case my daughter's opinions and questions, as less important than those of the text. I want my daughter to know that her input is valued. While listening is an important skill, critique and connection are at least as important. The authors of two articles I read recently have influenced me in changing how I read to my daughter and how

I listen to her reading. Writing about some of his experiences as a kindergarten teacher, Jeffrey W. Wood says that his "students quickly learned that they could interrupt a story with questions and experiences that related to the book" (9). Jeane F. Copenhaver notes that when she reminded her daughter that it wasn't polite to interrupt reading, she missed many connections her daughter was making to the text and that her daughter wanted to share with her. Reflecting on her own behaviour afterwards, Copenhaver notes that her daughter's "method of calling out her thoughts would be inconsistent with some teachers' expectations for discourse during read-aloud time" (148-49).

The two colleagues I mentioned above also talked about writing, purposeful writing. They saw writing as a way of sharing reflections on reading. While some of us respond immediately to text, for others, the processing comes afterwards, in quiet reflection after the full text is read. In our family, there are many moments of writing. As well as writing lists for groceries and things to do, we write letters and cards to family and friends. We also send emails. Not only are they sent to family and friends outside our home, we also give letters and cards (and occasionally emails) to each other. Those writings contain messages of love and encouragement. As well as being opportunities for writing, the cards are an



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opportunity for developing emotional and artistic literacies. Recently, my daughter passed me a card with a drawing of me reading a book. It contained a written message, “My Daddy loves to read.” This past year, my partner and our daughter recently accompanied me on two trips to conferences where I was performing some of my research. After each trip, my daughter wrote and illustrated a book about the journey. She has also written other books. We have read these books to each other and she has read them to others. Writing is something to read. It is a way of communicating the world and a way of communicating with the world.

So it seems that our practices, our own habits, were what the experts recommended most in terms of “teaching” a child to read. Buoyed by the encouraging comments of my colleagues, I decided to continue ensuring, with my partner, that our home was a literacy-rich environment for our daughter. The discussion with my colleagues helped to make me more consciously aware

of practices that were helpful, or unhelpful, in creating that literacy-rich environment. Helpful practices were letting our daughter select her stories for reading, not rushing reading, reading in a variety of settings in our home, and talking about our reading. Unhelpful practices would be “managing” reading, not allowing sufficient time for reading, reading only at assigned times, or reading only in specific areas of our home. I have become a more conscious, and less self-conscious, co-creator of a literacy-rich environment, an environment created with my partner for our child, and an environment which our child plays a conscious role in transforming. Nevertheless, as I detail below, I continue to make mistakes. Hopefully, I also continue to learn from them.

All environments need to prepare for transitions. A literacy-rich environment is no different. It was shortly after that momentous occasion with the Robert Munsch book that I began to think, and talk with my partner, about how to introduce our daughter to books where

the story was longer and unfolded over many more pages. I was wondering about how to introduce our daughter to novels. We started with one of Mary Pope Osborne's books from the Magic Tree House series, *Night of the Ninjas*. We read one chapter each evening at the table after dinner. The second book, Barbara Park's *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid Smelly Bus*, we read on the chesterfield; again, one chapter each evening after dinner. Each of these novels came from a different series. In both cases, while my daughter seemed interested in them at the time, she had little interest in continuing with reading from either series. For the third novel, my daughter selected E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. We began reading *Charlotte's Web* at bedtime, with the intention of reading one chapter per night during story time. Often, two or three chapters were read each night because our daughter loved this compelling and engaging story. Shortly after completing our reading of *Charlotte's Web*, I received an invitation from Perry Nodelman to write a review of some books that were considered "first novels," a way to introduce children to novels or what are sometimes called "chapter books." I was delighted with the opportunity to read more stories written for children, to share more books with my daughter, and to reflect on both the specific stories and the reading process itself. My daughter was also

thrilled to receive a box of new books to read together. What follows is a brief description of our experience over a few months, my reflections on the specific books, and what I learned from the experience.

The Texts: Sharing a Reading Journey

The series of books that received the most attention in our home was the collection which became known to us as the "Banana books." The books called Green, Blue, Red, and Yellow Bananas, published by Crabtree Publishing Company in St. Catharines, Ontario, are well written and vibrantly illustrated. The Green Bananas are referred to, on the back of each book, as "easy stories for readers ages four to six." Blue Bananas follow and are for children aged five to seven. The Red Bananas, for ages six to eight, are described on the back of each book as "the next level up from Blue Bananas in the Bananas reading series. Designed to build confidence in a child's reading abilities, each story helps children progress from the first stages of reading toward chapter books." The series concludes with Yellow Bananas. These books contain considerably more text and are for children aged eight to ten. Each of the stories contains life lessons that are located in experiences to which children can easily relate and where they can imaginatively put themselves.

One such story is *Shout, Show and Tell!*, written by Kate Agnew and illustrated by Lydia Monks. This story has three “chapters,” or three short stories, all located in Mrs. Green’s class. On the fifth day, Daisy’s loose tooth finally comes out and she finally gets called on to share something. Sean is loud and is constantly asked to play quietly, but when he and Mrs. Green accidentally get locked in the storage closet, he is asked to shout as loud as he can. Lily becomes anxious when asked to draw a picture of her home and the people who live there. She doesn’t know where to start. Mrs. Green gives her a hug and more time to complete her work. Lily draws four pictures of four separate homes, and she is in all of them. *Shout, Show and Tell!* was the first of the Banana Books that we read. Whether or not a child identifies with any of those differences, it is not a stretch to say that we all feel different at times. It’s nice to know that we’re not alone; or, even if we are, it’s nice to know that we don’t have to be lonely. My daughter, however, did not focus in on the theme of difference. She liked the book because Daisy lost her tooth in the apple. Daisy, like my daughter, was getting her adult teeth and Daisy, like my daughter, liked apples.

Hoppy Birthday, Jo-Jo, written by Pippa Goodhart and illustrated by Georgie Birkett, is a great little book to help children locate themselves

in a family, and to understand that love is not a finite product. Like *Shout, Show and Tell!*, this story deals with difference and the acceptance and celebration of difference. Jo-Jo realizes that she can share her home and her parents with her new baby sister, Baby Roo, and that there are still ways that she is special. My daughter also loved this book, but, again, not for the same reasons that I enjoyed it. She liked how Jo-Jo was given a surprise party by her family, and she liked Jo-Jo’s change in attitude toward her birthday party.

The third book we read, *The Magic Footprints*, written by Melissa Balfour and illustrated by Russell Julian, is a fantasy adventure that includes the safe relationships with supportive, loyal pets/animal friends and the risk taking sometimes necessary in human relationships. Tim gets a toy plane for his birthday. While Tim and his dog Zip play with his plane, “Somebody” is watching. Lola, the new girl next door, brings Tim a present—footprints. Tim wakes up to find that his footprints have gone. He follows them out the window and on an adventure with Lola. It is a lovely bedtime story because it introduces the wonder of dreaming and how our dreams can become stories to tell. Once again, the acceptance of difference and how we can make friends across difference is an important and evident theme; and again, my daughter’s interests in the story differed from my

own. She liked how Lola was so creative with her gift to Tim. She also liked the illustrations of the tracks on the floor and on the ground.

Flora the Fairy, written by Tony Bradman and illustrated by Emma Carlow, was one of my favourites in the Green Banana series. It is a beautiful, simple, yet complex narrative that explores empathy, misreading behaviour, and misreading intentions (something often done by and to children). Flora is a fairy who is afraid of cats. When her mom drops Flora at her grandparents' house while she does errands, Rufus, the grandparents' cat, has to be put outside. The grandparents decide to change Flora into a cat so that she can understand cat behaviour and not be afraid of it. The story invites us to see the world through another's eyes. It also deals with patience and, once again, what seems to be a constant theme in the Bananas series (a theme I welcome), understanding and celebrating difference. "You know how I like fairies, Daddy!" my daughter said when I asked her how she felt about this book. She loved it. As well as enjoying a story about fairies, she thought that changing Flora into a cat so that she could see how a cat felt was a very creative idea.

"Here I Am!" said Smedley, written by Simon Puttock and illustrated by Martin and Ann Chatterton, is the story of a shy chameleon; it is

the only Blue Banana book that we read. With the encouragement of a bold new student in school, Smedley overcomes his shyness and begins to explore and share his talents. Shyness and being new in some situation are experiences that many children have. As well, sometimes difference can be a talent. This is the case with Smedley, who becomes an artist. It is also the case with his new friend, who discovers that she can be a true friend to someone who appreciates her. My daughter liked how Smedley changed colour. Picking up on the theme of caring and support, she said that she liked that Smedley was encouraged and that he was told, "You can do it!"

Our first book in the Red Bananas series was *Pa Jinglebob: The Fastest Knitter in the West*, written by Mary Arrigan and illustrated by Korby Paul. Even before opening the cover, a good discussion about difference and stereotypes could be held around the title of this book. (A "Wild West" sheriff in his cowboy hat sitting in a wooden rocker while knitting breaks a few stereotypes we might have about boys and hobbies. The subtitle, *The Fastest Knitter in the West*, also shows that different skills can be valued.) On the other hand, one could also leave it to the story to offer the message. The story both invites and challenges the reader or listener to unfold the messages in its pages. When Not-Nice Nellie and her bandits ride into town,



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Jemina is not impressed that her Pa doesn't take the traditional role of a sheriff and run them out of town at the end of a pistol. With six chapters, this book is definitely more challenging for readers than the Green Bananas books, but the story is very engaging. I had originally planned to read a chapter per night, but on the third night my daughter said, “Please, can we read the other chapters tonight?” I read chapters four and five and saved chapter six for the following night. My daughter loved this story. She was amazed because she had “never seen anybody who could knit so fast before” and she liked how Pa Jinglebob knitted a trap for Not-Nice Nellie and her bandits.

Dragon Boy, written by Pippa Goodhart and illustrated by Martin Ursell, was our next book from the Bananas series. This is another wonderful book addressing and celebrating difference. Lily's grandpa who talks to the hills, the dragon who is mother to two *odd* twins, and dragon boy himself are all different in their own ways. All are outside, or on the margins of, their communities while living within them. Undeterred by the

hurtful gossip of other dragons and dragon boy's own discomfort with his difference, the dragon mother tells her two children—dragon boy and his twin sister—that being different is special. The relationship between Lily and her grandfather is a significant one: it reminds us how important elders are in the lives of our children, something our society seems to have forgotten. Again, children can connect with the characters. My partner and I have noted our daughter's special connection with elders such as her grandmothers and great-grandmothers. We have seen her interact with them, and they with her, in ways that show a comfort and respect that we often do not see in adult-child relationships. There are no issues of power. Each has stories to tell and each learns from the other's stories. Here, my daughter focused on the experience of having a story to tell and having someone special to tell it to. She mentioned that she particularly liked that the man in the story had a child of his own and that he told her the story of when he was the dragon boy. (Actually, the girl in the story is the man's granddaughter, but I think

the main issue for my daughter was the gentle relationship between them and the sharing of a story from adult to child.)

The next story we read in the Red Bananas series was *The Wrong Kind of Bark*, written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Garry Parsons. Finlay (a young student) claims that he is listening even when he appears to be distracted/daydreaming. The results are humorous and, in one case, life-saving. This is a delightful story about a dog-hero, which also employs a playful use of language to explore homonyms. After Finlay brings in *flour* instead of any kind of *flower*, and a nut with a bolt instead of a nut from a tree, we can expect that he will bring the wrong kind of bark as well. It is fun for children to discover that language is open to multiple understandings and that their choices, which may be considered errors by adults, could also be correct when viewed differently. "It was amazing how, when the teacher asked for a certain kind of thing, he always brought in the wrong kind of thing," my daughter noted as we talked about this story.

Two other books, both written by David Sutherland and illustrated by David Roberts, concluded our very pleasurable reading experiences with the Bananas series. Well, I would not say *concluded*, really, because my daughter often returns to her "Banana books" and

they continue to offer many enjoyable reading moments. As I was writing my reflection about *Pa Jinglebob: The Fastest Knitter in the West*, my daughter sat in the rocking chair in the study reading *Shout, Show and Tell!* She read all three chapters aloud to herself.

Samantha Cardigan is obviously the hero in *Samantha Cardigan and the Ghastly Twirling Sickness*, as well as *Samantha Cardigan and the Genie's Revenge*, but Rabbit, her sidekick, certainly makes his contributions as well. Both are international adventurers who set out to solve problems which befuddle all other characters in the stories. In reading these stories, I was a bit concerned that the stories and illustrations carried some stereotypes. Not all Asians have long nails and long thin moustaches and not all Arabs are desert dwellers. Rather than dismiss the books outright, however, I think it is useful to engage in discussions about textual and visual images which could be considered stereotypes. Do all people from the cultures presented textually and visually dress in this manner and live in these surroundings? How would the stories unfold if told from the point of view of each of the characters? Do we sometimes fear what we don't understand? Why? How could we learn more about a culture different from our own? How could we share aspects of our own culture with others in a manner



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that honours their differences? My daughter admired Samantha's "very good plans and ideas." She also liked that Samantha "had special powers" and "had a good imagination."

More Texts: A Reading Journey Continues with a Lesson for Daddy

After the Bananas series, we moved on to books with more text, such as the First Novels collection from Formac and the Scholastic Wild Paws series. We also borrowed one of the Yellow Bananas books from the library. It was my intention to review those books as well, and to include my daughter's responses to those books. This, however, did not follow the same path as reading the Green, Blue, and Red Bananas books had. There was a lesson here for me to learn, and one that took me longer to learn than I like to admit. While my daughter certainly enjoyed the Bananas series, she soon clued in to my game plan; actually, she clued in to it sooner than I realized I had one.

I was leading my daughter to novels, but she did not want to be led. She was enjoying her

reading experiences. She loved her many books. Early into the more text-filled novels, my daughter was suggesting other readings at story time. I sometimes took the position, "Well, we've started this chapter book, so . . ." I was forgetting one of the helpful practices my colleagues told me about, and one that I had previously been practising, which was to allow my daughter to select the reading materials at story time. In my eagerness to "graduate" my daughter to novels, I was forgetting that this was her reading journey, not mine. As well, I was surprised by my own behaviour in placing novels in some kind of elevated status above other genres. This was inconsistent with my own practice as an educator and as a teacher educator, where I have encouraged my students to value all genres of writing. While we can certainly have our own preferences for reading, and share those preferences, it is a questionable, even unethical, practice to attempt to impose those preferences on others. Given our position as educators, we have a responsibility to introduce students to a wide range of reading options.

Introducing does not mean making choices for them.

How could I have forgotten that as a parent? Did this go back to my earlier anxiety about becoming irrelevant in my daughter's reading journey? Was I anxious that my daughter might not be able to read novels when she was required to do so in school? Was this a fear that my daughter might not be as successful as she could be, or a fear that I would be judged negatively as a parent for not having sufficiently prepared my daughter? What would that say about an educator who prepares other educators to teach? Was I misunderstanding my role in my daughter's reading journey? What was (is) my role, anyway?

Nowadays, I am relearning to listen to my daughter's choices at story time. While I will continue to introduce her to diverse genres of writing, I resist any infringement on her choices about reading. I am learning to step back, to

question my own practices, my own judgments, and my own fears, and to reclaim my role as someone who shares this journey, but does not direct it. It is noteworthy, I believe, that in a recent diagnostic test given by her teacher, my daughter scored over a year above the expected reading level for her age. She has achieved this by reading texts of her choice, not by having her reading managed for her. I (We) would do well to remember that it is an honour to be invited to share someone's reading journey. We honour that invitation by remembering that our role in such a journey is that of a guest, to enjoy what is offered, or a partner, to bring our journey to share as well and to offer support and encouragement. We do not need to manage our children's (or our students') reading journeys (nor should we). Rather, we need to ensure that our children (and our students) have the freedom to read what they choose.

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