



In the Twinkling of an Eye



Sarah Ellis, editor

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

by A. Mommy (a.k.a. Beth Graham)

"What are they going to give me this time?"

It all started so innocently. In my never-ending quest to find things to keep my four year old son Jimmy busy this summer, I signed him up for the public library's summer reading program. Although he's not yet reading independently, I reasoned that since we read to him so much anyway it would be a kick for him to keep track of the books we shared during the summer. After all, Jimmy loves books; our family goes to the library at least once a week. What could be more enriching, then, more wholesome, than taking part in a library program designed to promote its collections and the wonder of books?

Well, it turned out I may have painted an overly rosy picture for myself of the potential thrills of the summer reading program, for I was once again reminded that even if a child is already an avid reader, the lure of summer reading program prizes is more than enough to misplace the emphasis from reading for its own sake to reading to "get something." Yes, my heretofore innocent child came down with a bad case of the "gimmes" this summer, courtesy of our local library. I should have known better, having once been a children's librarian and seen firsthand summer reading program mentality at work in both young patrons and library staff. Nevertheless, I somewhat naively encouraged Jimmy's participation by explaining that this would be merely a "fun way" for him to keep a record of the different books he would be reading during the summer anyway, program or no program.

The library volunteer who registered Jimmy, however, emphasized the cool prizes he would get after he read so many books. As Jimmy and I walked hand in hand through the parking lot after having signed up, my child showed he now fully understood what the reading program was really about when he asked, "How many books do I **have** to read to get my first prize?" (Emphasis mine.) Have to read?? This, coming from my kid, who only that morning had read for the sheer pleasure of it? All I could do now was weakly repeat what larks we would have doing all kinds of reading and listing the books we completed during the summer. Larks. Mmm-hmm. Everyone knows that the point of reading is to get a reward. The damage, you see, had been done.

On the other hand, so much time spent in the library choosing books this summer has also had a wonderfully positive effect on my child: Jimmy discovered a whole world of nonfiction -- including folktales -- beyond the somewhat limited, stubby shelves of the picture story collection. Moreover, my experience helping Jimmy choose things to read this summer provided me with a closer, altogether fascinating, look at his reading interests. So, if grade school children are often required to write essays summarizing their summer activities at the start of the new school year, allow me to offer the following report of the books Jimmy and I shared during our vacation and what I learned as a result; namely, that if you can't judge a book by its cover, still less should you judge a child by his Power Rangers t-shirt.

In other words, never assume. It became glaringly obvious to me this summer what a mistake it is to underestimate the diverse reading interests of a young child, to dismiss his ability to comprehend materials an adult thinks are beyond him. Given the opportunity to "graze" the library, that is, to select and reject his own books, the preschooler will choose a phenomenal variety of titles from all areas of the children's section, fiction and nonfiction. The young child's experiences are deepened by having the whole of the literary feast offered: he may partake of a sip of Seuss one week (something familiar) and a



dribble of dinosaurs (or another exotic dish) from Dewey the next. Encouraging a preschooler's desire to make his own choices now -- sensibly guided by an adult, of course -- will enhance his ability to make well thought out choices down the road. The result will be a lifelong appreciation of libraries and their resources.

Another thing to keep in mind about young children and their books during the preschool years is that adults must be closely involved in all aspects of the process, from selecting books to reading them, in order for children to fully enjoy the experience. A parent who follows his young child's lead at each step -- first by borrowing books the child has expressed interest in and then by making himself available to read them to the child -- shows the preschooler that reading is a worthwhile activity; moreover, that the child and his choices are worthwhile. Nurturing the preschooler's confidence in his ability to make good choices begins the child's intimate relationship to books and reading.

In addition, being read to widely and often provides an important motivation for the child to someday "crack the code" and read for himself. Granted, all these noble parental aims can be hard to remember when reading the same Calvin and Hobbes comic ad nauseum (and boy, have I this summer!), but nobody said this parenting thing was going to be easy, or the process always completely appetizing.

So, despite our library's summer reading program, or perhaps even because of it, Jimmy explored a wide range of topics this summer, from fireworks to dinosaurs. He read stories ranging from a Navajo folktale to what I like to think of as the preschooler equivalent of trash fiction. What follows is an annotated list of a few of Jimmy's selections, including some ideas as to why these books interested him and could, in turn, hold appeal for other preschoolers.

Begay, Shonto. *Ma'ii and Cousin Horned Toad*. Illus by the author. New York: Scholastic, 1992. ISBN 0590453912.

Greedy wolf Ma'ii visits Cousin Horned Toad's farm to cadge yet another free meal. Although Ma'ii's loathe to share in the work of the farm, he's eager enough to take advantage of Horned Toad's good will. Ma'ii tricks his cousin into his mouth, reasoning that once Horned Toad has been gulped down he will have the farm to himself and all the corn he can eat. It turns out to be a bitter pill to swallow. A Navajo trickster tale with preschooler appeal: the small can, indeed, overcome the mighty. Jimmy had also recently returned from a camping trip during which he saw his first "horny devil" in the flesh, which may have added to his fascination with this book.

Braybrooks, Ann. *Pooh and the Dragon*. Illus. by Darrell Baker. New York: Golden Books, 1997. ISBN 0307987981.

Have you ever seen a dragon fly by the stream? Neither has Pooh. Do you care? Neither do I. However, Jimmy did; this punny play on words (dragon fly = dragonfly) that sets up a series of misadventures truly appealed to him. Another reason Jimmy liked this book is because it is based on the Disney Channel's New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh, which Jimmy loves for its portrayal of the childlike exploits of Pooh and his friends, all told with gentle humour. At the risk of offending those who deem Golden Books to be of high literary value, this title is, in my mind, a prime example of trashy reading for the preschool set. Not much thinking involved here. Nevertheless, even kids are entitled to read mindless pap on occasion (after all, adults, myself included, revel in Jackie Collins and other less-than-literary books from time to time). Moreover, dare I suggest that exposure to this and other watered-down versions of classic stories could someday lead to reading the real thing?

Carrier, Roch. *The Hockey Sweater*. Illus. by Sheldon Cohen. Montreal: Tundra Books, 1984. ISBN 0887761747.

A real "go figure," this nostalgic tale of a French-Canadian boy in love with the Montreal Canadiens and its star Maurice Richard. As an American, the story is totally foreign to my experience; I would have thought it outside a preschooler's realm as well. Nevertheless, Jimmy has asked me to read this to him several times this summer. Perhaps this speaks to the Canadian in the boy (he's a dual citizen). It also



reminds Jimmy of time spent at Christmas in Canada and the fun he has had himself in the snow. Personally, the story of *The Snowy Day* is a little more my speed, or *Branley's Snow is Falling*, beautifully illustrated by Holly Keller; both are more factual and informative if one wants to know more about the science of snow. But, as I said before, I firmly believe in following my child's lead, even when the final destination remains unclear.

Gibbons, Gail. *Dinosaurs*. Illus. by the author. New York: Holiday House, 1987. ISBN 0823406571.

Gibbons, with trademark style, introduces several species of dinosaurs to young children through the use of bold illustrations and a spare, informative text. A wonderful first exposure to those terrible lizards. Alongside Aiki's *Dinosaur Bones*, this gives budding paleontologists a fine introduction to the subject. And here I thought children didn't go "dinosaur crazy" until the third grade or so...

Hill, Eric. *Spot's Birthday Party*. Illus. by the author. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1982. ISBN 0399209034.

When Jimmy's feeling tired or insecure he returns to old favourites from his distant past, such as this lift-the-flap story about the endearing Spot.

Katzen, Mollie and Ann Henderson. *Pretend Soup and Other Recipes: A Cookbook for Preschoolers and Up*. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 1994. ISBN 1883672066.

Although Jimmy and I had the misfortune of attending a truly uninspired children's program at our local library -- making our "favourite food" out of play dough -- we did have the good luck to come across this book displayed amidst the burgers and dogs. The authors, of Moosewood Restaurant fame, present 19 recipes, first explained simply for parental "assistants," then laid out step by step for the real chefs. Recipes range from quesadillas to homemade lemon-lime soda. Instructions are easy to follow and are accompanied by unintimidating drawings to clue in prereaders. Jimmy and I have already served up Chocolate-Banana Shake, Oatmeal Surprise, and Pretend Soup (a delectable mélof cold juice and fruit). My child loved this book so much that he insisted that I write out several recipes for his own recipe book. Jimmy has been my kitchen helper for a long time; this book showed him that sometimes he can be the Big Cheese.

Kuklin, Susan. *Fireworks*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1996. ISBN 0786801026.

A nod in our summer reading to that most American of American holidays, the Fourth of July. After experiencing the neighbourhood pyrotechnic hoopla of the Fourth of July, Jimmy and I learned more about fireworks in Kuklin's informative book, which chronicles the efforts of a family fireworks business to prepare for the busiest day of its year. The book appealed to Jimmy's scientific bent (aren't all young children "little scientists," after all?) and to his inherently destructive nature, which I assure you he didn't get from my side of the family. Vivid colour pictures made this book, intended for slightly older children, accessible to my preschooler.

Watterson, Bill. *The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes*. Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1992. ISBN 0836218981.

This is another of Jimmy's choices that initially had me a bit bamboozled. At the beginning of summer Jimmy pulled this out of my bookshelf to "read" and he hasn't looked back. What's the attraction, I wondered? Is it that it's a big book like those he's seen his parents read? Is it all the pictures? I finally gave up and asked Jimmy, who replied in his best long-suffering tone, "It's all about a little boy and a tiger, Mom." Ah, right. Calvin plays with a stuffed tiger; Jimmy is a tiger (don't ask). Calvin's alter ego is a superhero; so, too, is mild-mannered Jimmy. Calvin loves dinosaurs; so does Jimmy. "Reading" this book over and over to himself has helped Jimmy practice sequencing and other important prereading skills. Unfortunately, now he insists that *Calvin and Hobbes* be part of his bedtime reading routine. Ever try explaining comic-strip sarcasm to a four year old?



Wood, Audrey. *Weird Parents*. Illus. by the author. New York: Puffin, 1995. ISBN 01405492420.

Need I say more?

Other Personal Favourites

Aliki. *Dinosaur Bones*. Illus. by the author. New York: Crowell, 1988. ISBN 0690045492.

Branley, Franklyn M. *Snow is Falling*. Illus. by Holly Keller. New York: HarperCollins, 1986. ISBN 0064450589.

Keats, Ezra Jack. *The Snowy Day*. Illus. by the author. New York: Puffin, 1976. ISBN 0140401827.
