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Books Before Vegetables: Why Working Moms Shouldn't Slack on Reading

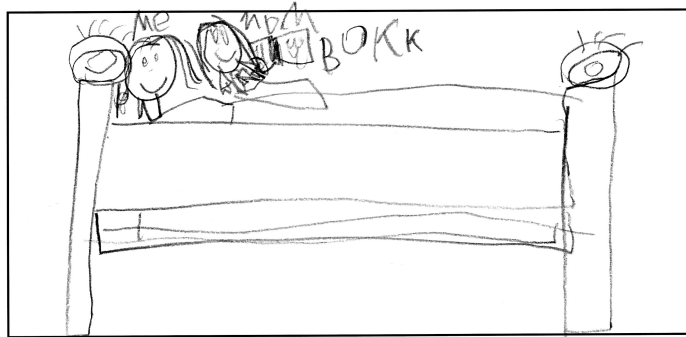


My nine-year-old son came out of his room with *The One and Only Ivan* in his hand, a tear in his eye, and said, "That was the sweetest book I've ever read." When I asked him why, he answered, "The gorilla made a promise to the elephant. And he kept it."

We had started Katherine Applegate's *Ivan* together, as we often do. My son rarely finds a book cover appealing. But if I read a chapter or two, he begs for more and I can usually send him off with this momentum to finish on his own. *Ivan* is a silverback gorilla who lives in a zoo inside a shopping mall. My son and I laughed so hard at his observations ("Humans do seem to enjoy watching me eat. Luckily I am always hungry. I am a gifted eater."), that we woke my five-year-old daughter. She emerged from her bedroom, ruffled like a well-worn page, to see what all the fuss was about.

Before long, the three of us were in fits of hysterics, laughing perhaps too hard for how funny it was. In fact, *Ivan* is a sometimes melancholy book about loneliness, loss and loyalty. But it was pure whimsy to be up so late, reading an awe-inspiring novel in my bed, which stands so high that the kids need a stool to climb in. We often feel like we're on a magic carpet ride, flying through the books that we read together there each night. I hadn't realized what a central place this bed had become to our family until my five-year-old drew a picture of us reading together there for a school assignment. Her teachers had asked her to draw something about her family, and this was the first place her mind went.

The bed where my mom read to us was a hand-me-down canopy from her own childhood bedroom that she and her sisters painted pink and orange in the 1960s. I am still drawn to that color combination, because it reminds me of sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with my mom, taking turns reading *Nancy Drew* aloud. This is the most



MOMMY READING TO ME

vivid childhood memory I have of my mother: that spunky Nancy Drew, the flower-child bed and the warm, understood feeling that somehow encompasses my whole relationship with my mom.

There are many places I am skimping as a writer/mom-of-three, where my mother never skimmed. My children will not always have a vegetable on their plate. Their nails will grow into cat's claws before I clip them. I will skip the next Parents' Association meeting. I will fail to buy new socks when they've all mysteriously disappeared; my kid will go to school barefooted inside her boots. I will not sit on the floor with the Little People and the choo-choos today. I might never make a homemade Halloween costume or bake éclairs with a custard filling that has to be stirred for an hour like my mom did.

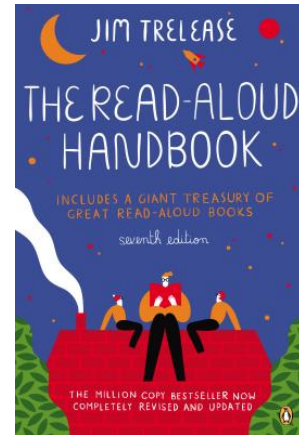
There is one place, however, you will never find me skimping, where I always stir the pot. And that is on the books. On the reading. If you are a working mom, you are practicing triage every day. You simply cannot be at every game, sing all the right songs, check every homework problem. But I'm writing to beg you to make the books in your child's life matter. Make them your family's home base.

I'm sure most of you already do this. Still, I want to take a moment to remind you of all the reasons you do it, so you can feel good about yourselves as reading mothers even when there are no vegetables on your child's plate. Enjoying books with your kids is the single best way to leverage your parenting time. It is the ultimate multi-task, the biggest bang-for-your-buck, because it allows you to accomplish numerous, valuable goals at once:

- **First and foremost, reading aloud is an exquisite way to impart love and nurture your relationship with your child.** As I read, I try to visualize the words as a sort of love force, emanating from the page the author so carefully created, traveling through my voice and sinking deep inside my children to where they feel and know my affection. Reading is intimate. It allows for snuggling little people who are otherwise too busy to stop wriggling and running and playing video games. As Will Schwalbe (who read books with his mother until deep into middle age) explains in his inspiring memoir, *The End of Your Life Book Club*, “books can be how we get closer to each other, and stay close, even in the case of a mother and son who were very close to each other to begin with, and even after one of them has died.”
- **Reading aloud to your children improves their vocabulary and reading skills, even when they are older and can read by themselves. It helps young children learn to read in the first place.** Honestly, I hesitate to even mention this, because I cringe at the thought of vocab being the reason to read. But I know it is a hook that will keep over-achieving parents reading aloud to their kids, so I put it right near the tippy-top. And there could not be a better or more convincing book on this topic than Jim Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook*, which just came out in its seventh edition because it is *that good*. Every parent should consult it, especially for its marvelous suggested reading list.

- **Making books a big part of your family life will keep your kid engaged in school.** Sometimes teachers will make your kids read things that will be too challenging, that will be boring or that they will not connect with. Instilling a love of reading in your children will help them weather these storms of negative reading. Reading a good book will always feel like home to them, if you have made it home. They will seek that home even when there is a bump in the road, or perhaps because of it.

- **You are building the imagination and developing the natural curiosity of your child and yourself.** Reading with your kids is a great way to learn all sorts of things together. Whether it's *The Truth about Poop* or *Tales of the Trojan Horse*, you'll both know more after you read it.



- **Reading gives your children tools to confront life's problems.** Books are a great way for kids to experience problems without actually having them, to noodle through them and to see how they might be fixed. Kids are too smart not to apply these lessons to the challenges in their own lives. Reading novels is such an excellent problem-solving inspiration, in fact, that Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin have just published a clever, new book for grown-ups, entitled *The Novel Cure*, which prescribes hundreds of novels to help you resolve every ailment from midlife crisis to lack of courage.
- **Reading develops empathy.** Putting herself in the shoes of a myriad of characters makes your child a better person. If you need any convincing on this point, check out the recent *New York Times* article, "[The 5-Minute Empathy Workout: Reading Chekhov](#)," which summarizes a recent study finding that "reading literary fiction ... leads people to perform better on tests that measure empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence."
- **Books can help you solve thorny parenting problems.** When my kids are stuck in a rut of fighting and bickering, I pull out a Beverley Cleary book. Her *Ramona* stories are filled with sibling rivalry. Sometimes it is more effective to discuss what the sisters in the book are doing to each other than what my kids themselves are doing. It allows for less judgmental discussion.
- **You are building your child's sense of spirituality.** In the same way that taking your child to the forest or the seashore can inspire in him an understanding of the greatness of our world, reading can heighten your child's connection to something greater than himself. My son now compares every book he reads to *The One and Only Ivan*. He keeps saying after each new novel, "It was a *great* book, but a notch

below *Ivan*.” When I asked him what he thought made *Ivan* so great, he explained, “First a great book makes you happy, then it makes you sad and then you don’t even know what you’re feeling, but you’re crying.” I think the reason he cherishes *Ivan* so deeply is because of the way it made him feel. It brought him to a higher place, a place where words fail him.

- **You can read to your children when you are a sleep-deprived zombie.** When I am exhausted, I sometimes find it hard to play games, take my kids to the park or undertake an art project. But I can lie down with a book and go on autopilot. This isn’t my best work as a reader. I’m not sending a love wave to my kids in these moments; I’m not taking my kids to a higher place. But I can make it happen, and it can fill the time meaningfully until bed.
- **The busy, chop-chop world falls away when you read.** You are completely there with your child. Just the rhythm of your own voice and the voice of your child. Just the pictures on the page. No conference calls, no emails, no laundry folding. Having to hold the book with one hand and turn pages with the other, needing to use both your eyes and all your voice, forces commitment to the present moment. I am never grounded in quite this way with my children at any other time.
- **The pauses that occur while inside this cocooned moment of reading are treasures.** Sometimes we only make it a page or two before someone interrupts and we are talking about something completely unrelated to the book, like the lockdown drill at my daughter’s school or the kind of puppy we would get if we were getting one (which we are not, because I am skimping there, too.)
- **Books provide a wonderful springboard for all sorts of deep conversations.** At my son’s book club, the boys read aloud from *The One and Only Ivan*: “Humans waste words. They toss them like banana peels and leave them to rot.” This single quote sent the boys down many unexpected paths. First, they decided that the gorilla was right: people talk way too much, especially mothers right after school when they ask too many questions about how the day went. Why won’t moms just be quiet? And then, rather poignantly, one boy observed that his father had spoken for a really long time at his grandfather’s funeral. “It felt like five hours,” the boy explained. Interestingly, the friend next to him pointed out that there was good reason for so many words here. The funeral was such a significant moment, and the grandfather had probably been so important to him, that the boy’s dad needed to say a lot. These particular words were not just banana peels. And this discussion was better than any therapy session.

Given all these powerful benefits, please don’t be halfway about your books; take them the whole nine yards. Read beside your kids from the day they are born till the day they leave your house for good, and even after that if you can find a way. (My mom and I still read the same books and debate them. I loved *The Interestings* and she thought it was so-so.) Don’t

stop reading to your kids just because they learned how. Use the voices—the silly ones, the spooky ones, the accents. Ham it up, make it an event. Your children appreciate it more than they let you know.

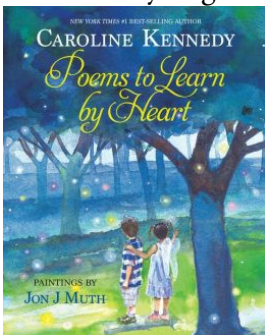
Spend time at the library and don't be a miser there. Teach your kids self-control at the toy store instead. In the library, fill up a bag and come home with twenty or thirty books. This allows children to experiment, develop their own sense of judgment and toss a book aside when it stinks. I love to go into a house with messy piles of books everywhere, because I know it's a home filled with love and thought and spirit.

Make your books varied. It's just like the rainbow on their plate – serve them non-fiction and comics, histories and picture books (even when they're "too old" for them). Books about math, old classics, poetry and even that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* you can't stand.

Put some research into it. Go to the library or bookstore without your kids so you have time to browse and muse and evaluate. Read reviews on Amazon and Goodreads and visit kid-friendly book websites like <http://www.amightygirl.com> for girls or <http://guysread.com> for boys. It is a sin to put a bad book in front of your child. If they don't like a book you've given them, open a new one. Don't let non-school reading feel boring.

Weave the books you read into the fabric of your family's life. Talk about books at dinner or on the way to school. Bring the family to author talks at the library or to the movie version of the book you just read. Make books social: set up a book club for your kid. And make sure to have good food and a fun activity (not just "boring" discussion). If you recently finished *My Side of the Mountain*, take your kid for a hike. Just read the Percy Jackson series or *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*? Go to the local museum to see what visuals you can find from mythology. (NYC's Met has created a walking tour devoted to *The Lightning Thief*; ask for it at the info desk.) Reading *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* (an amazing middle grade novel) or *Tikki Tikki Tembo*? Go out for Chinese tonight. Your kid plays soccer? Then read *Messi: The Inside Story of the Boy Who Became a Legend* or *Froggy Plays Soccer* or *Guys Read: The Sports Pages*. Like to do community service as a family? Then invite some friends over with their old books to donate to a charity that works with kids, like Legal Aid, a shelter or a hospital.

I can hear you grumbling. Don't I already have enough to do? Why is this crazy bookworm giving me such a guilt trip? My best answer is that when you share the joy of books with your children, you bestow unparalleled gifts upon them. And they upon you. Shortly after my youngest child's second birthday, she started asking me to read her Blake's "The Tyger" over and over. (She actually called it "the lion poem," but we'll excuse her inconsistency.) It was in Caroline Kennedy's wonderful anthology, *A Family of Poems*, with a provocative illustration of a tiger. I must have read the poem to her a hundred times. Then one day, she turned to me and the world stopped, because she recited the entire first



stanza, word for word, without missing a beat.

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

There is nothing better than a child reciting William Blake. But, more importantly, her recitation confirmed that even a two-year-old can connect with human language in a deep way. My daughter did not understand what “The Tyger” means, yet she clearly recognized its greatness. She was drawn to the way the words roared together and loved Blake’s fiery song so much that she wanted to possess it. The only way she could was to commit it to memory. And now “The Tyger” is hers – a priceless gift we forged together.

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