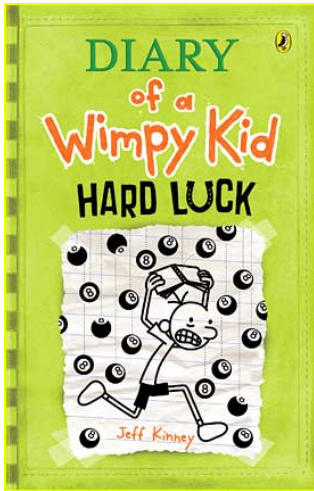


# Maureen Langloss

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## In Praise of Naughty Books



At my son's school book fair this year, I witnessed more than one boy lingering at the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* table – lifting the latest edition's lime green cover, suppressing a mischievous smile, a look of longing in his eye – only to be whisked away by a parent who didn't want anything to do with the Wimpy Kid. I also saw first- and second-grade parents tugging their kids from the picture books. They steered their boys to the “real” books instead – the serious chapter books without so much as an ink drawing. I, too, have felt the urge to pry my daughter from the *Rainbow Magic* fairy books at the library – you know the ones with the terrible, redundant writing and the horrible, motionless plots. I have fantasized about moving my son's Marvel super hero comics up to a shelf he can't reach.

But I keep fighting this urge, because I know it would be a big mistake. When children are small and learning to read, the goal should be to ignite a love affair with books. Really set it ablaze. If laughing about underpants and bodily emissions makes your kids want to read, then load up on those farting books. It doesn't matter if the fairy books make us cringe; it's not about us or our taste. It's about what will make a kid want to sit down with a book and do something that is hard – sound out symbols, decode, make sense of new vocabulary words. And to do this when playing Minecraft or turning on the television would be so much easier.

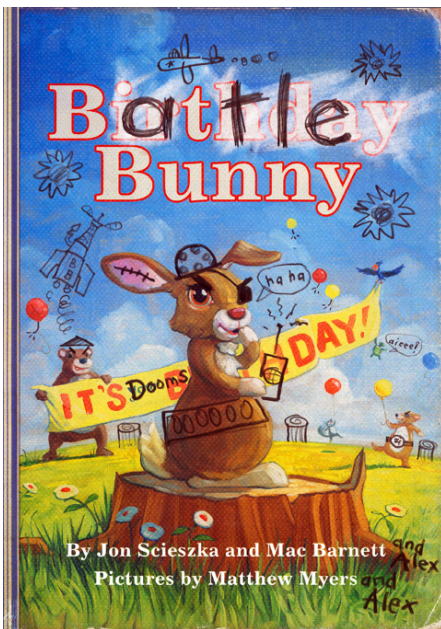
I have heard many parents complain that their babies and toddlers simply aren't interested in books. Their little ones won't sit still to listen. This is when to teach kids that books are toys. Give babies the books with the wheels on them that can be driven around like Matchbox cars, the ones with the animals that can be pulled out and put back in, the ones with buttons to press and music that plays. Give them books without much text, but with large, vivid photographs and mirrors and pop-ups inside. Maybe read them a word or two here or there, but no need to overdo it.

One of my favorite books to read to the preschoolers in my library class is *Book!* by Kristine O'Connell George, because the kids go wild for this simple tale. In it, a boy receives a book as a present. But that book hardly gets read at all. Instead, it is worn like a hat (which the kids find simply hilarious especially if you invite them to wear a hat-book too), taken for a ride in a wagon and snuggled like a stuffed animal.

The trick is to help your older child continue to view books as toys, as entertainment, for as long as you can. This is where the naughty books come in. The picture books and *Where's Waldo* for big kids. The super hero comics – with a big helping of action figures on the side. The funny books. Even Shakespeare knew that a shot of bawdiness and scatological humor goes a long way to keeping audiences entertained.

The call of the naughty is strong; you can harness its appeal to lead a hesitant reader to drink the reading Kool-Aid. When my son didn't want to practice reading, when it seemed like pure struggle to him, I left a few *Captain Underpants* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* in his room. He quickly came around asking me to read them aloud. I told him I'd heard they were naughty books and that I didn't care for bathroom humor. He'd have to read them to himself if he were interested. It took a matter of moments for him to open the lid and start laboring over them. He was a full-fledged, fluid reader within a matter of weeks. I have suggested this technique to parents of reticent readers, and it works like a charm.

"Inappropriate" books also can engage kids who already know how to read, but don't. I vividly remember the gaggle of fifth- and sixth-graders huddled around *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and Judy Blume's *Forever* in the back of my school library. These "naughty" books that our parents wouldn't let us break into brought even the least interested readers into the library checkout line. Maybe they discovered something a little too mature for them in these books, and yet there is something to be said for getting kids in the challenged reading group into the library in the first place. Obviously, there are limits to this theory; let's not put out the terrorist handbooks and the pornography.



But *Battle Bunny*. Try that on your ten-year-old son. This picture book by Jon Scieszka and Mac Barnett is perhaps one of the most ingenious children's books I've ever seen. It masquerades as a toddler's Golden Book – a sweet tale about a bunny celebrating his birthday. But don't give it to your two-year-old! Because the conceit of the story is that a fictional, mischievous child has taken a pen to it and slashed out the saccharin, typewritten text. He has replaced "Birthday Bunny" with "Battle Bunny." When a crow happily tells Bunny it is his "special day," Bunny's reply is changed from, "That is true," to "That is false! ... Because today I am going to whomp on you, birdbrain, and pluck you like a sick chicken!" *Battle Bunny* is the only book my son has ever pulled out like a toy during a play date. He read it to his friend, and the two boys giggled their way through the whole thing.

Mischievous characters aren't just a device to trick your kids into reading – the way Jessica Seinfeld teaches us to sneak vegetables into our brownies in *Deceptively Delicious*. They

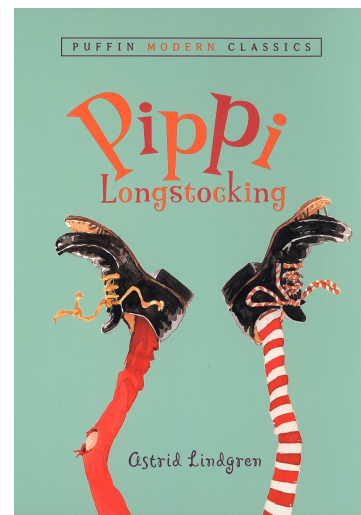
also serve a wonderful substantive purpose for your children. Dan Chaon, one of my favorite writers for grown-ups, explains in the afterword to his mesmerizing book, *Stay Awake*: “I’m interested in people who screw up. I like people who have the capacity to misbehave and do wrong things because that seems to have more dramatic potential for me, as a reader and as a writer . . . I’m curious about people who might be considered ‘unsympathetic’ – in some deep unconscious way, I feel that I am part of their tribe.”

I think kids, likewise, feel that characters such as Big Nate, Battle Bunny and George from *Captain Underpants* are part of their tribe. In them, they find camaraderie, companionship, someone who gets what they are going through, someone who feels the things they feel. Every day, grown-ups chip away at children’s natural tendency to test the waters, to say inappropriate things, to keep their bodies in constant motion, to misbehave. “Stop hitting your brother,” “Indoor voices,” “Don’t pick your nose,” “Don’t whine,” “Get down,” “Get up,” “Get dressed,” “Wash your hands,” “Sit still,” “Speed it up,” “Slow down,” “Try harder,” “Don’t try so hard.” It’s a constant litany of orders and corrections all ingraining overwhelming stockpiles of impulse control in these little humans. What a relief it is to bond with a character like Paddington who makes sticky messes wherever he goes or like Greg Heffley who feels stupid and on the fringes of his school social group. These books provide a valuable escape valve, a safe place for bad things to happen.

Perhaps their “relatability” is why some of the best characters in children’s literature are naughty, irreverent, rebellious, even bratty. Holden Caulfield, Ponyboy from *The Outsiders*, Eloise, Ramona, Nicholas (the French *Wimpy Kid*), Pippi Longstocking, Curious George. Where would we be without them? The characters my kids seem to enjoy the most are those who flout the system, say things we wouldn’t dare say, surprise and shock us. These characters teach us how to look at the world inside out and upside down. Remember how Pippi sleeps? With her feet on the pillow and her head under the blankets.

Some parents fear that these characters will be a bad influence on their kid’s behavior. Although my kids very much enjoy the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Ramona* series, they don’t act like or act out the main characters. (And when my kids act bratty like Eloise, then I look to my own parenting. I can’t blame the books.)

I grew up in a very demanding household. My dad used to bring the dictionary to the dinner table and test us while we swallowed our peas. My mom would pick through my school essays with a scalpel. (“You used the word demonstrates twice on this page. Your transition’s weak here.”) When it came to chores, a turn with the vacuum wasn’t enough. We had to wash every stick of furniture, wall, door and molding with Murphy’s oil soap too. And Catholic guilt was practically served with breakfast.



But my mom also had a wonderful naughty streak. There were memorable school mornings when she would announce, “Skip day! I called the school and told them you’ve got a fever.” Sometimes skip days were spent at the Smithsonian, but other times they were just spent in pajamas. Mine was the mom who slept through church on a regular basis and who’d show up to school with McDonald’s french fries for the whole class when she forgot to pack my lunch. She was the mom who took me and a friend to the school parking lot late at night when we were only fourteen to let us try our hands at driving. She didn’t yell about our sudden breaking, excessive foot on the gas and semi-accidental horn honking. She just giggled along with us.

Speed up, slow down. Everything in good measure.

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