

What Makes a Good Second-grade Book?

## A Letter to Parents

BY ROBIN SMITH

Dear Parents,

Reading is a big part of every second grader's life. But reading can be fraught with anxiety for these new readers. Most seven- and eight-year-olds in my classroom *can* read, but their reading levels vary widely, and they are not yet very good at finding books for themselves. They often notice what everyone else is reading and become fretful if some of their friends can read books that they can't yet. They may even report to you that "I am the worst reader in the class." Please do your best to ignore this anxiety, as it is just part of the age, and help your child choose books that he or she will love. Here are some ways to go about this task.

Books for you to *read aloud* to your child should:

- be interesting to her. Second graders like all sorts of things, from dinosaurs to tornados to fairies to family stories. I tend to choose shorter books because they are so likely to want to read, themselves, the books I read aloud to them. I do read them longer, more complicated books, but I save those for later in the year when the children are more settled and can accept that some books are too challenging . . . for now.
- be interesting to you. You can't fake this any more than they can. Make sure you really want to read that book about giant lizards of the Galápagos before you start it.

Books for your child to *read independently* should:

- be short. New readers are great starters and not great finishers. So make sure the book is short enough to get through. (The Magic Tree House books, *Martin Bridge*, *Judy Moody*, *Ruby Lu*, *Andy Shane*, *Marvin Redpost* . . . that sort of book.)
- be illustrated. Most new readers see chapter books as the Holy Grail and turn their backs on picture books. This is unfortunate because new readers really need those picture cues to help them understand the story. If you show an interest in picture books and never give the message that they are for younger children, you might get your new reader to read them, but don't fight that battle too hard. Once your child calms down about reading, he will not worry about whether a book is a picture book or a chapter book. But right now, he will. Help your child find some chapter books with at least one picture in every chapter (Johanna Hurwitz's series of books about Russell or her PeeWee & Plush books come to mind).
- be humorous. As dour as your second grader can act at times, she loves humor, the goofier the better. If the word *underwear* is in the book, that's a sure sign of a winner (hence the tremendous

success of the Captain Underpants and Melvin Beederman books in the second-grade reading world).

- be easy on the eyes. Young children need a lot of white space around the printed word in order to see it without strain. They should track the words with their fingers, too, but many of them see that as juvenile and will not do it. So large, clear typeface is really important for this group of readers. (And for older ones as well: I have often wondered if the success of the Harry Potter books has something to do with the generous font and white space.)
- be exciting. Think cliffhanger endings and tears. Think *Stone Fox*. Think *My Father's Dragon*. Think *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. Think melodrama.
- be easy to understand. This is not the time for magical realism or unreliable narrators. This is the time for straightforward plots, easy-to-understand characters, and clear settings. The story can be set in the Indonesian rain forest for all these readers care, but the book should not use up much ink describing it.
- be a part of a series. Not *all* new readers read series, but in my experience with this age, most do. And most feel a need to read the books in order. So, if your child really, *really* loves the first Boxcar Children book and wants the second one, that's what she means. The second one, and then the third. Your eyes might roll back in your head while your child is on a steady diet of Pony Pals or Rainbow Magic books, but try to be patient. She will move on when she is ready. When children read their way through series fiction, they are building confidence and fluency. They are meeting characters and getting to know them. Eventually they will tire of them, but for now, that kind of repetition is just what they need.

If you help your child find books to read, it won't be long before he or she will be passing books on to *you*. Imagine the joy you will feel when you hear, "I just finished this book and you will love it, too! Want to read it?"

Happy Reading,

*Ms. Smith*

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