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I Can Read, You Know!

"I can read, you know!" my nine year-old daughter retorted lightly to her older brother this past summer. I don't even remember what he had said to her, but her reply stood out. It was a turning point for her, to declare that she could read.

I had taken my three kids out of school just over a year before that incident. Or, more rightly, they had jumped at the chance to leave when it was offered to them! At the time, my daughter was in grade two and one of her teacher's favourite students. She did well and seemed to enjoy going to school, though she was in one of the lower reading groups. I was therefore surprised, albeit happily, that she was on cloud nine for the next three days contemplating the fact she did not have to return to school when March Break was over.

Although she had read the early readers they sent home from school without much complaint, she did not want to pick up a book once home. She could often be heard to declare "I can't read" and nothing I said would convince her otherwise. I told her that if she was interested in reading a book herself, she could just ask me any words she came across that she didn't know yet and I'd tell her. No thanks, was her reply.

So I completely let it go; no pressure or expectations. At the same time I made a point of reading books to her and her brothers just about every day. Her older brother had been given the first Harry Potter book, so we started there. Everyone enjoyed the story immensely and we soon worked our way through all four books numerous times, eagerly anticipated the release of the fifth book in June, and then powered through it together in three days. If a movie we watched was based on a book, I might mention it. If someone asked a question that needed to be looked up in a book, I just did it. Books were just another part of our lives; I didn't make a big deal out of it. And whenever she asked, I read for her. Or her older brother would, usually when they were playing video games. I mentioned to her in passing that I was still coming across new words, that nobody knows them all ... and it probably helped for her to see me stumble trying to pronounce new words and names in the Harry Potter books.

Once in a while she would read a word or two, here and there. Occasionally I pointed this out to her, but still she insisted she couldn't read. It seemed her definition of "being able to read" was being able to read the Harry Potter books fluently. Or, more generally I think, being able to read and understand "real" books—those at the level of her vocabulary, understanding and interest—not the early readers where the story often suffers severely at the hands of limited vocabulary in the name of being "able to read". Sound reasoning, I think now. What's the rush?

Our first year of unschooled learning passed this way. I could see snatches though. As always with natural learning, the moments came unexpectedly and then moved on. It's when you put them all together over a period of time that you can start to see the picture coming alive on the canvas. On drives she started commenting on signs. Interesting. And reading stuff from TV commercials. Very interesting.

And then, seemingly out of the blue this past summer, her comment to her brother: "I can read, you know!" It may not seem like much, but I felt like she had turned a corner. Even though she had not yet picked up a book, even though she still openly declared she "hated books", in her mind it was no longer about her "being a reader"; it was about her being interested in reading.

I had been reading the Harry Potter books to the kids over and over the past year and we finally got them

on CD in mid-summer. The boys had had their fill but she would cozy up in her room and listen to them regularly. Sometimes I would bring her food, or tea and she'd smile and say thanks and continue listening.

September came and after listening to all five a number of times she started writing down things that were interesting to her: Umbridge's speech, the prophecy, the Sphinx's riddle, listing the names of the centaurs, clues she found that matched up with other books etc. I noticed her notebook filling up and one night while I was out I picked her up a new one I thought she'd like. She really appreciated that and she used it for her "good copies"—she said sometimes she's writing so fast it's hard to read.

This writing led to her looking things up in the books since at times she couldn't quite figure out the words from the CDs.

She took all five books up to her room and placed them beside the CD player so she had quick access. Not long after that she mentioned that she was sometimes following along in the book while listening. I thought that was cool.



Then one afternoon a few days later she came down from her room to show me that she had read the first two chapters of *Philosopher's Stone*! And said she was very surprised that the words aren't nearly as hard as she remembers (I imagine from looking at the books when I first started reading them). And she pointed out that many of the words in the Harry Potter books are harder to read since they are made up words that she doesn't see elsewhere. Cool! The next morning she spent in bed reading and made it to chapter four. She was very pleased with herself. For the next few days she read in bed every morning and at various times during the day and night. One night she brought her heating blanket in the backyard to the swing, ran the extension cord, brought out her pillows and a flashlight and settled in to read ... until it started to rain! She was so excited; she brought the book everywhere and was constantly saying, "I want to read" and finding a quiet place. And I quietly found a moment here and there to sneak away and find where she was holed up to catch a glimpse of her engrossed in a book.

Throughout October she was still going full steam ahead on her reading and writing — she was immersing herself in words. It hadn't taken her long to finish reading *Philosopher's Stone* and she soon started *Chamber of Secrets* but after a few chapters said it was pretty boring because she knew it all. She said at least while she's listening to the audio books she gets to do other things. And boy, does she do other things! Hmmm, let's see if I can list some of them: sewing costumes for her stuffed animals; sewing pillows for sale; creating wire jewelry using beads she's found around the house and designing and creating her own clasps; repairing couch pillows, pajamas, and Christmas stockings. Then she moved on to more writing — she marked all her favourite places in the books and wrote out many of the signs, letters, songs etc. that she could find in the storyline. Sometimes she wrote them by hand, sometimes she typed them. Some are hung on her door, others placed in vignettes around her room, and still others stored safely for use as props at the Live and Learn conference talent show this summer. More playing with words.

In November she pulled out our *Magical Worlds of Harry Potter* book and for the next few days she read that regularly. Gently stepping beyond the Harry Potter books themselves to one that would likely have the same vocabulary she was already comfortable with; and feeding her passion at the same time. Now and then she read some passages aloud to me and at other times she would explain what she had read. Then a couple weeks later she was reading all her email from her conference friends. Up until that point she had always asked me to read them to her. Then she took a *Nancy Drew* book from our library at home and started reading it. She was now definitely getting more comfortable with her reading and expanding beyond her initial "Harry Potter" zone.

I find it so interesting to follow her path to reading, which began in school with early readers. But she rejected those books once she came home to learn. She made no attempt at reading on her own over the next year and a half, but did lots of listening to the Harry Potter series and a few other books I read to them. Then a breakthrough when she declared that she could read, shifting the focus from being a reader to

being interested in reading. Finding a passionate interest she, within the course of a month, whizzed through the stages of writing things out as she listened to the audio books, looking things up in the books, following along in the books, and then reading one of the books independently. I'm so grateful that unschooling allowed her to find her own path to reading.

And a couple of weeks ago we were chatting in the kitchen and she asked about a book of names we have and then exclaimed in mock horror "Arghh! I'm turning into a bookworm!"