

Reading to Jake

by Bette-Jane Raphael

Last night, as on innumerable nights before it, I sat on the floor of my son's room, rested my back against the side of his bed, and opened a book. Behind me, snuggled under the covers, 12-year-old Jake lay with his head propped up on one hand, looking

to stick them on envelopes). Trucks, even 18-wheelers, leave me unmoved.

But I do love books, and I discovered very early in my son's life that, while I might never meet him on an athletic field or a tennis court, I could meet him almost every night on the printed page.

It started when Jake was less than a year old and *Good Night Moon* became an indispensable part of our nightly ritual. At the sound of the word "bedtime," he would look up at me and ask, "Moon?" I read that book until the pages came apart in my hands. I thought the print would fade from

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over my shoulder at the open page. This, his habitual posture, is probably a holdover from his younger days. When we first started what has turned out to be our most enduring mother/son ritual, our bedtime books were full of pictures.

I once wondered what I would ever have in common with my son. I'm not a sports fan, and I'm not interested in coins (except to spend them), or stamps (except

use. But no other book would do. For Jake, following the moon every night as it made a path across the window of one little bunny's bedroom turned the scary transition from being awake to sleeping into something comfortable and familiar.

I loved *Moon* and all the early books that followed, particularly those that had been my own childhood favorites. Reading *The Five Chinese Brothers* and *Horton Hatch-*

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es *the Egg* again after 30 years was like resurrecting old friendships. And for Jake, knowing that they'd been read to me when I was his age made these books that much more special, a bridge across the years between his childhood and mine.

Then there were those books that were new to both of us. They will always be our secret treasures because we read them for the first time together. I think we're each grateful to the other for being introduced to *The Dallas Cowboys Get Dressed*. The night we first grinned in delight over this wonderful book, I realized that I would never again begrudge my husband his hours of playing ball with Jake. Clearly, my son and I had a playing field all our own, a place where we shared things together that were both private and special.

Through the years, our reading has become a mutual expedition of discovery. When Jake was 7 and we started *The Little House* books, they were as new to me as to him. In their pages, we learned how to build a log cabin, make cheese, fashion a whatnot, pack a covered wagon, and survive a blizzard. When we finished the series two years later, it was as if a chapter in both our lives had come to an end.

After that, there were a couple of years during which we'd read only about dogs and horses. These were the books I'd gone past with a blind eye when I scanned the library shelves as a little girl. But while I wasn't interested in boy-and-his-dog adventures when I was 10, I was amazed to find them engrossing now. Would Red find his way back to his loving owner in the midst of a howling snowstorm? I'd be as fretful as Jake at having to wait until the following evening's reading to find out.

By reading books that Jake chose, I learned to value his areas of interest and expanded my own sensibilities. By showing Jake that he could enjoy the books I chose—that Tom Sawyer, say, is not only a classic, but is actually funny, too—I earned

his trust and taught him to keep his mind as open as his ears.

The books we read together teach us new things, but they teach us most of all about each other. We learn what makes each of us laugh, what makes us both tick. Jake's impromptu comments about a book are invariably more telling about his inner life than are his dutiful answers to dinner-time questions about his day. A fictional character that reminds him of someone at school or a fictional dilemma with which he identifies can easily get him talking about something close to his heart. Reading to my son has proved to be the surest way I have of getting to know him.

As my son and I "travel" from the four walls of his bedroom to Sherwood Forest or the Court of the King of France or the banks of the Mississippi, I am afforded a chance to get in edgewise some of the things I value most, to insert some grammatically correct language, humor, and civility into Jake's steady diet of *Beavis and Butt-Head* and "gangsta rap," and to show him aspects of courage and human connection he'll never see in a movie about lethal weapons.

The question now is how much longer our reading time will last. Given a choice, Jake will still turn off MTV in favor of a reading session, but how long can I bank on being able to grab his interest or his time? When he's 14, will he be too busy with his own exploits to listen to those of the Count of Monte Cristo? When he's 15, will his room be off limits to anyone past puberty, even with a book in hand? There are still so many amazing volumes out there on library shelves that we haven't read yet, so many stories to expand his mind and educate his heart. And there's so little time left. I will have to read very fast. ■

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