

Read to Your Kids

by Jim Trelease



I earn my living as a writer and motivational speaker for teachers and parents, talking about raising readers. I'm booked one year in advance and have been for the last 20 years. Furthermore, my father got me this job when I was five years old.

To be candid, I don't think my dad really knew what he was doing. He did know he had a fairly mischievous, hyperactive kid who was cooped up with his little brother in a four-room garden apartment in Union, New Jersey. He also knew that if he didn't give his wife a break from this child, she'd have some kind of breakdown.

So each night after dinner, he'd pull me into his lap, pick up *The Newark Evening News*, and begin reading the comics page, starting with "Nancy (and Sluggo)," and then "Blondie (and Dagwood)," "The Phantom" and "Li'l Abner."

Even though it was just reading the funnies, it wasn't as simple as it appears. Because some of the strips involved humor, and I was still a year removed from school, dad had to explain what was supposed to be funny about Dagwood's relationship with his boss, Mr. Dithers. This was my introduction to the work world, that delicate balance between employee and management.

It's also worth noting that in order to understand a joke, one must be able to juggle two thoughts at once: the way it is in the joke/cartoon and the

way it's supposed to be. Not everyone understands jokes, especially those who can't sustain the two thoughts simultaneously in their brains. Thus my father was giving me brain exercises without either of us knowing it.

Things got even deeper when we'd read Al Capp's "Li'l Abner." Because it was filled with social commentary about the relationships between men and women or satire on business and government, I had a lot of questions ("What's a bachelor?") that needed thoughtful responses. So the funnies were and still are more than funny.

As I grew, we moved from the funny pages to include the rest of the paper. Dad didn't stop

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with the newspaper, though. After we finished the comics, he'd read me the next installment of the serialized novel in that week's Saturday Evening Post.

Of course I didn't understand all of this. But whether he knew it or not, my father was sowing the seeds that would bear fruit years later when my book on reading aloud to

children (*The Read-Aloud Handbook*) would spend 17 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list. The singular pleasure I was experiencing each night in being held by my father in his big leather chair would sustain me through hours of phonics instruction in school. "This sure is boring," I'd think to myself in class, "but if it's what I need to do in order to work the magic my dad makes with the newspaper and the Post, then I'll put up with it."

What my dad taught me by example was that reading isn't worksheets in class, it's not phonics drills. Reading is fun, it's exciting and funny, and it can be painless. Without that in the back

of my mind, I wonder if that hyper little kid would have stuck with all the drills and skills.

Thirty years later, I'd read the statistics that validated what my parents had done. As Depression products, neither of them had gone to college, but the research out of the U.S. Department of Education shows that the students with the highest reading, writing,

and math scores are the ones who come from the homes with the most printed materials (books, magazines and newspapers). We didn't own a car until I was in fifth grade and didn't own a house until seventh grade, but we owned a whole world of print.

I speak nearly 100 times a year and none of what I say can be found in any of the English or math courses I took in college, but all of it can be found in the lessons I took in the lap of my dad when I was a child. I never had a more effective teacher or a class that was more fun.

*A former journalist, Jim Trelease published his best-selling book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, in 1979. Now in its fifth U.S. edition (with three international versions), it has sold nearly 2 million copies and is a common text in teacher education. Trelease is one of America's most sought-after educational speakers and has been honored for his contributions to children's literacy.*



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- Use the news to demonstrate American democracy in action.
- Connect kids to their community through local stories.
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