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Bookworms in the making

BY JEANNETTE GOON
EDUCATE@THESTAR.COM.MY



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Cultivating the reading habit should begin from a young age as parents play a vital role in getting their children to read.

MY PARENTS read to me when I was little” is how many avid teen readers describe the beginning of their love affairs with books.

These are the same teens who describe reading as “exploring other worlds”, “taking a look into another person’s mind” and “living other lives”.



Bonding sessions: Learning to read from a young age becomes fun and enjoyable when a parent is involved. When parents treasure books, the values will rub off on their children and in turn, encourages the youngsters to pick up reading as a hobby.

“My mum started me off with the *Peter and Jane* series. She often brought me to the public library and I loved it. Reading was, still is and always will be a big part of my life. It shaped me,” explained Katherine Ong of SMK Seksyen 19, Selangor.

“Everytime I read, it feels like I’m in another world. Whatever the character feels, I feel it too and that’s magical,” added the 17-year-old.

Natashya Khoo, 17, said that a book has the power to “take you into different worlds”.

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"I love how they have given me the chance to live out so many lives in my own life," said the Penang Chinese Girls' High School student.

For those who started reading after their pre-school years, the love for reading came with the discovery of books and the stories within their pages.

"I started reading when I was in Year One after finding my mother's old classics. I then inherited her obsession over Enid Blyton's Malay-translated books," said Muhammad Farid Taquiddin Zulkifly, 17.

The lad from Maktab Rendah Sains Mara (MRSM) Pengkalan Chepa added that whenever he reads, he imagines himself as a silent spectator of the events unfolding in the book and even went as far as to identify strongly with Artemis Fowl, a character in a young adult fiction series.

Others, despite being introduced to reading at a young age, only really fell in love with it after discovering treasures of their own.

"I began reading at the age of three when my pre-school teacher introduced me to the *Peter and Jane* collection. However, what really got me hooked on reading was the *Harry Potter series*," said Prasanna Nara, 17.

Sixteen-year-old Felix Culas quipped that he was only five or six years old when he was bewitched by the charm of Roald Dahl's books.

Nalina Santhiran, 16, has been reading since she was a child but it was her first Enid Blyton book that got her interested in reading. "The book was a gift for my sixth birthday. I just couldn't stop reading after that," she said.

Encouraging reading

This corresponds to what parent Leow Hoi Loong has to say about how she encouraged reading among her four daughters. A former Biology teacher, Leow began reading nursery rhymes to her eldest daughter when she was only two days old.



More than a book: Yoong (left) feels that reading is an important part of education. To him, children can learn many things including experiences they may not be exposed to, from books.

"I also bought a lot of books for them. Back then, there were book sales where you can get books for 50 sen!" she said.

With high-achieving daughters that work at Google and study at universities like Cambridge and Harvard, Leow said that reading gave them a "thirst to know more".

Leow and her husband created an atmosphere that was conducive for readers. "You must teach children to love books from young. Don't allow them to tear the books," she advised.

However, she recalled encouraging her daughters to colour in the pictures in their storybooks. Besides reading, she also let her girls listen to audiobooks and watch movies.

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Reminiscing over the audiobook of *The Hobbit*, she spoke on how “one reader could create so many characters” and how much her daughters had loved listening to it. “It taught them to love stories,” she said.

The fact that their television time was limited also contributed to their love for reading. “They had a lot of spare time and started looking for more books on their own,” Leow said.

She also suggested that parents allocate an area for books so that the house book collection could keep growing.

Another parent Lim M.L. shared that when she was teaching her children to read, she would allow them to read only one page of *Peter and Jane*, after which she would tell them stories based on the pictures.

“So they never thought of reading as work but associated it with stories instead. After the storytelling, I would keep the book away and they would not be allowed to touch it until the next day. So reading was something special,” she said.

Playing their parts

MPH Bookstores chief operating officer Donald Kee agreed that parents play a crucial role in getting their children to read from a young age.

“Parents need to set an example. They must be seen with a book at all times, reading must not be confined to only newspapers. It would be good to set up a mini library with a special corner just for reading,” he said.

He added that visiting bookstores or libraries with children is also “one sure way to get kids hooked on reading”. Sadly, many are seen at toy shops instead, he said.

“It is important for a parent to be involved and make reading fun as a child is more inclined to participate when they experience the joy their parents feel from reading,” he added.



Once up on a time ... Storytelling is one way of getting children hooked on reading. Here, the children are enthralled as they listen to stories about Eori; an animation series in which the main character Eori is able to transport into stories whenever he reads while wearing his magic hat.

“As a bookstore, we try to do our part to encourage reading by creating a membership for children whereby they are entitled to a 10% discount on children’s books.

“We also communicate with them constantly via newsletters, conduct storytelling sessions in our stores and publish reading guides with tips and recommended titles for parents to use,” he explained.

He admitted that with so many distractions such as television, computer games and interactive e-books, children’s book publishers have “no choice but to be more creative to compete”.

“Today, you can find books that come with a CD or DVD with songs. Some may come in attractive boxes with freebies or accessories. Some even have specially designed casings such as a diary with locks,” he said, adding that the packaging

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differs based on target age groups.

"The majority are targeted at the younger age group who are starting to read. Some parents think that the price of the book with the CD is justified because it provides auditory and visual stimulation," he said.

Although the television may be an "easier" form of entertainment, teens who love reading find magic in books that moving pictures could never achieve.

"When I pick up a book and read, I get to meet incredible people and explore the sights and sounds of a place exclusive to me," shared Nalina, who added that authors only provide an intricate guideline but the rest was up to one's imagination.

"Everyone sees a book in their own unique way. It's definitely so much more fun than movies which have been 'figured out' for you. Nothing beats reading," she asserted.

Learning through reading

For COSMOTOTS iqd founder Yoong Theng Cheong, reading is more than just entertainment. "There are different levels of reading and if a child is reading a book just for its plot alone, he or she might as well watch television," he said.

Yoong believes that reading is an integral part of education. However, many members of the public do not really understand what reading entails, he said.

"Literacy is not the same as reading. It is the ability to pronounce words and understand simple sentence structure," he said.

Reading, however, involves other elements.



Precious perks: Through reading, children learn about character development and are given the opportunity to "travel to other worlds".

"By reading, children learn to read character, understand human relationships and the environment around them," he explained, adding that in this day and age, children "need this more than ever".

"The outside world has become more dangerous and we cannot let them wander out there on their own anymore.

"As they lack this crucial experience, secondary experience can be obtained from books," he said.

While Yoong admitted that a child cannot be forced to read if he does not want to do so, there are techniques that can be used to entice a child to enjoy reading.

These techniques are employed at the COSMOTOTS IQ development centre, which Yoong started up "by accident" after developing techniques to cultivate reading habits in his three sons.

After over two decades in this line, Yoong's opinions echo that of Kee's in that parents play a vital role in encouraging the reading habit.

"If parents don't value books, that value will not rub off on their children," he said.

He does however, provide a solution should non book-loving parents wish their children to grow up otherwise.

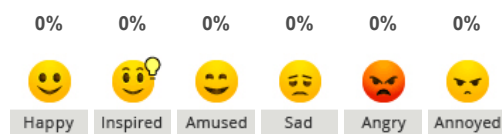
"If they don't have a reading culture at home, they can send their children to experts," he said.

He believes that children need to be "inducted into feeling that reading is food for the mind".

"They need to feel like reading is a daily necessity, like eating," he said.

■ *English for More Opportunities is part of The Star's on-going efforts to highlight the importance of the language in helping people get ahead in life.*

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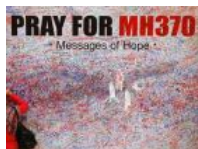
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