

*The Shared Reading Experience* by Viki Ash

I am not a teacher. I do not have a first-hand understanding of the constraints, the pressures, the escalating expectations that you as classroom teachers experience every day. Although I did teach kindergarten at one time (a long time ago) my imagination now falters as I try to envision the classrooms you inhabit, the problems you encounter, the challenges you face.

I am a librarian – a children’s librarian – and an old-fashioned children’s librarian at that. I work with children of all ages helping them find books, designing programs that will bring them to books, sharing books with them in groups and one-on-one. Notice the key word? BOOKS. My job involves computers and spreadsheets, databases and email, websites and wikis, but the work I love revolves around children and books.

Today, I would like to invite you and your students back into the world of books – into the world of pleasure reading. Hopefully, you are already a resident of this world and you are nurturing new recruits every day. If so – terrific! If not, let me remind you of what you are missing.

When I was in the fourth grade at Arnold Elementary School my teacher, Mrs. Hooper, read to us every afternoon after lunch. I can still hear her voice reading *Charlotte’s Web*, *Mr. Popper’s Penguins*, *Johnny Texas*, *The Helen Keller Story*. I remember title after title. That year, Mrs. Hooper shared her joy of reading with us every day – not for just ten minutes and not for just one chapter. Some days we could persuade her to keep reading well into the time we should have moved on to social studies or science. We loved the books she read. We hated for one to end and couldn’t wait for the next one to get started. We loved hearing her read almost as much as we loved playing softball together on the playground. (Mrs. Hooper was an excellent umpire and called them as she saw them!)

Through that shared reading/listening experience, our class developed a shared set of reference points. We spoke to each other using language we had learned in books. We had inside jokes, code words, and comforting phrases that the other fourth grade classes didn’t understand. They hadn’t shared the same books. We felt bad for them – and slightly smug. (Thinking back, those other classes may have had their own shared-book culture, but that possibility did not occur to me at the time.)

In addition to the cohesiveness our shared experience fostered, another wonderful thing developed. We learned that really great books were available. Books we could find on our own, read on our own, and tell each other about. Because we wanted to read, we did read. I discovered Laura Ingalls Wilder that year and learned about Robert McCloskey from my best friend Diana. I found out that I loved biographies and hated mysteries. I learned you could read a book you liked over and over again.

Today’s children are more likely to know Charlotte from the movie than from the book and more likely to find Little House on the Hallmark Channel than on the library shelves. There are, however, new and wonderful books available that speak to contemporary children in just the same ways these older titles spoke to me and my classmates back in 1963. I encourage you to go out and find them. (And to put in a plug for my profession, if you have trouble finding good books, ask a librarian. I can promise you that school and public librarians are eager to help you find just the right book for you to share as you begin your read-aloud tradition.) You’ll love reading these books and love sharing them even more.

Of course, Mrs. Hooper wasn’t the first or the last teacher to read aloud to me. And there really is nothing significant about the fact that she was my fourth grade teacher. Any grade will do and any teacher can make the magic of reading happen for a class of children. All it takes is a love of reading and a strong commitment to sharing the pleasure.