

## Eddie's reading

Filling a six-year-old child's time is a constant challenge. There is no television in our house and we watch precious few videos on the computer. Eddie has no electronic gadgets. Consequently, he has a ferocious appetite for being read to.

Eddie has known his alphabet for three years but he is just now starting to get serious about reading. I continue to read to him, and expect that I will for another few years. It strengthens the bond between us. It gives me a chance to explain the stories. It gives him a chance to sound out words as we go along without interrupting the flow. So what have we been reading?

The topics of his interests change over time. Two years ago it was classic Russian children's literature: fairy tales and epic poems written for children like Dr. Aibolit and Barmalay (Dr. ItHurts the veterinarian and a Caucasian cannibal who eats little black children -- couldn't do that in America). A year ago it was large books on technology that our housemate Yurii had given him, books explaining how tanks and airplanes and automobiles worked. He also loved all of the natural history books that I bought him last Christmas. He has a great interest in dinosaurs, and paleontology in general. He has much more interest than the average kid in the plants and animals around him.

All the while I continue to read him bedtime stories. They also change over time. This last year his favorites have been the Winnie the Pooh books by A. A. Milne. We have read every Pooh story a dozen times. He also loves Kipling, especially the Just so Stories. A year earlier it had been Mowgli and The Jungle Book. Some of the stories like "The Undertakers" take a little explanation but carry deeper messages. Even Winnie the Pooh involves some explanation. Talking about "The Expedition To the North Pole" we had a lively discussion about Adm. Perry's expedition, Roald Amundsen's and Adm. Byrds' expeditions to the South Pole, Lewis and Clark's expedition across America, Stanley's expedition across Africa, and Marco Polo's solo expedition to China 800 years ago.

He loves Dr. Seuss. We have the five book set: The Cat in the Hat, Hop on Pop, One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish, Fox In Socks and Green Eggs and Ham. They have been read until they are tattered. We have the complete Beatrix Potter in Kindle, and he loves it. Especially "Two Bad Mice." He giggles with delight when the mice start smashing things.

At the moment we are getting into chapter books. We are halfway through both "Charlotte's Web" and "Sideways Stories from the Wayside School." Eddie calls these "computer books" because I bought them on Kindle. These books give us a lot of opportunity to talk about how farms operate, American schools, and what life was like half a century ago.

Today, Sunday, I have been home with a cold for a week and a half. Eddie has asked me to read his new favorite book, Asterisk and Obelisk and the Golden Sickle, in Russian. It is a complicated undertaking. The book is written for an adult audience. It is full of side jokes about Parisian traffic, waiters in French restaurants, snooty hatcheck girls, lifestyles of the elite and so on. Moreover, many of the characters in the original spoke French with an accent. So the accents get translated into Russian. It is a double challenge – to understand the words in the first place, and to understand them as they are mispronounced in the cartoon. We are making pretty good progress. Looking

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ahead, I can see we were one page short of the climax when Eddie's friend Sophia arrived this morning. We will finish it in our next sitting.

Reading books in Russian is a bit of a challenge, but if I were screwing things up too badly one of the Russian speakers in the household would step in to correct me. I note that however flaky my Russian may be, nobody else ventures to read him stories in English, however good their spoken English may be. Ukrainian puts me a bit further out on a limb, but I am getting to the point that I understand most of the vocabulary and don't worry too much about the pronunciation. If anybody corrects me, it's usually Eddie. And even he is not right all the time. As we were talking about "Charlotte's Web" I tried to explain that a spider was an arthropod, and gave him the Ukrainian translation, which means roughly "leg with members." The same as the Latin in arthropod. He resolutely insisted that there was no such word in Ukrainian; he hadn't heard of it.

Over the past year we have read books in several languages. People gave us a book about Lars, the Polar Bear, and "Matthias' day at the Zoo" in German. I bought dual language – Russian and the original – copies of "The Little Prince," "Don Quixote," "Grimm's Fairy Tales" and a few others. I tell the stories in English; translating on the fly into Russian would be too complex.

Translating as I go means that the translation is not consistent. If you recall Calvin's dad reading "Hamster Huey and the Goopy Kablooey," you know that kids tend to hold you to the exact text. Getting a different translation every time through requires that Eddie change his mode of processing: go for content instead of presentation.

Let me offer one sentence reviews of these books. Eddie doesn't like to be preached at: one time through was enough for "The Little Prince." We read the Russian version of "Frog and the Stranger," a morality story about prejudice, and after a lively discussion about Gypsies such as live in our neighborhood he has lost interest. We both thought that "Don Quixote" was nothing but a litany of egregious violence and stupidity. We quit halfway through. There are only about three stories in "Grimm's Fairy Tales" that a kid would want to hear more than a couple of times. On the other hand, "Charlotte's Web" is wonderful, "The Wayside School" is truly funny, and Milne and Seuss are timeless. For Christmas 2017 I have ordered boxed sets of the complete Roald Dahl, the complete Calvin and Hobbes, and three 2nd grade science books on biochemistry, genetics and chemistry. Yes, Denise –we'll get around to Mrs. Frizzle before long.

It will probably occur to Eddie sometime next year that he is really too old to be sitting on my lap as we ride the bus or read stories. I'll accept that moment when it comes, but for the right now I'm savoring the physical contact. It is a metaphor for intellectual and emotional contact, and I am delighted with what we have.