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Thinking Outside the Cover

Pendred Noyce

Our children are growing up in an ever more media-saturated world. According to a Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation report, in 2010 the average eight-to eighteen-year-old spent fifty-three hours a week connected to entertainment media—watching videos, playing electronic games, listening to music, and chatting with friends (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 2010). Often, young people are using more than one electronic tool at a time. Such heavy exposure gives kids a facility with new technology that many adults envy, but there are other, more worrisome effects. Teachers report that students let “text-speak” leak over into their written work. Time with electronics replaces time with friends, studies, physical activity, or books. Constant stimulation and multitasking may leave kids with a diminished capacity for deep, prolonged concentration and thought.

When kids can immerse themselves in collaborative 3D online games with fantastic artwork and nonstop action, a flat, solitary, black-and-white object such as a book can seem tame by comparison. Of course, it’s not. A book offers grand scope to the imagination. It exposes us to new ideas, connects us to people distant or no longer living, and gives us a sense of the beauty and structure of language. Most of all, it teaches us how to immerse ourselves deeply in thought.

Nothing can replace reading’s power to build language and thinking skills. A middle-grade novel offers more complex language than do television, movies, or the dinner table conversation of college-educated adults. How much kids read is a great predictor of their academic success. Reading builds vocabulary, understanding of sentence structure, and background knowledge—all of

which help students understand more complex texts and makes further reading more rewarding.

Because librarians, teachers, and authors know these things, we conspire to connect children to books. First, we try to get books in their hands. Organizations like Reach Out and Read, and Reading Is Fundamental give books to children whose families don’t have the resources to buy them. I’m a supporter of Maine’s Raising Readers program, which gives twelve books by age five to every child born in the state. A bag of starter books and brochures on reading aloud goes home from the hospital with each new mother. At each well-child visit, nurses reinforce reading advice and give out a new, carefully selected book. To mark graduation from the program at age five, the child receives his or her very own library card. In 2010, perhaps as a result



of the program, Maine had the highest rate in the nation of parents reading aloud to their children.

Once the child is immersed in the world of school, peers, sports, and electronics, recreating the sense of shared delight in reading becomes a challenge. I wrote my first children's book, *Lost in Lexicon: An Adventure in Words and Numbers*, partly as a way to continue the reading connection with my youngest son. He loved word games and logic puzzles, so I created a world to entertain him. In the book, Ivan and Daphne travel to a magical land of word and number villages, where they must find clues to save the lost children of Lexicon, who have wandered off, following mysterious lights in the sky. My son and I laughed as we read the book together, and once *Lost in Lexicon* entered the wider world, I looked for a way to extend that joyful interaction to other adults and children.

Family math and science nights have been a feature of some schools for many years. With the dedicated leadership of a school librarian, a couple of teachers, and/or dedicated parent volunteers, a school cafeteria becomes for one evening a playground of ideas where parents and children interact as peers, playing math games or using paper chromatography to solve the mystery of who stole a stuffed animal. These events connect parents to school, demystify the curriculum, and allow children to witness their role models acting as learners. Besides, these events are fun.

Why not build similar events around books? As I pondered this question, I met Kirsten Cappy, a dynamic event creator whose motto is "Connecting Kids to Books." Together we designed a Lexicon Villages event. For each event, I set up nine stations, or villages.



Lost in Lexicon is an adventure book for kids and parents about two cousins who discover an enchanting land where words and numbers run wild. It is Pendred Noyce's first novel.

Each station presents an activity mirroring one of the challenges Ivan and Daphne face in the villages of Lexicon. Students invent metaphors for the Mistress of Metaphor's pot; they feed synonyms to Emily the Thesaurus; they reproduce images using Tangrams; they work with Greek and Latin roots to build new words; they measure π and do a maze while looking only in a mirror. Kids love it, especially when parents staff the stations. Visiting all the villages takes kids and parents somewhere between a class period of forty-five minutes and an open-house evening event (with pizza) of two hours. I've held events in libraries, schools, museums, bookstores, and science fairs.

My experience with Lexicon Villages has convinced me that we can and should think outside a

book's cover to engage kids and their important adults in the adventure of sharing books. We can design events that celebrate reading while creating a sense of interaction and play to rival the electronic world. I plan to create similar events for the upcoming books in the Lexicon series, as my characters delve into lands of music, art, and myth. Meanwhile, I've joined with four friends to launch a new publishing company, Tumblehome Learning, where every book will be an event of its own. We plan to produce science-based mysteries, adventure tales, and biographies, each accompanied by a science kit and online supports so kids can extend their reading by exploring the science with friends, mentors, or parents.

Book events are one more tool school librarians can use to

help books maintain their special place in children's lives, even as those lives become crowded with iPods, movies on demand, and electronic games. The payoff is worth it: another generation fired with imagination, thought, and the love of fine language.

Pendred Noyce, a doctor, education advocate, and mother of five, is the author of the award-winning middle-grade novel *Lost in Lexicon: an Adventure in Words and Numbers*. Guidelines for holding your own Lexicon Villages event can be found at the Parents and Teachers page at www.lostinlexicon.com.

Works Cited:

Rideout, Victoria J., Ulla G. Foehr, and Donald F. Roberts. 2010. "Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds." Menlo Park, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. <www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf> (accessed November 14, 2011).

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