

BOOKBAG

Giving the Gift of Reading

By Mary Anne Duggan

One of my nieces refers to me as “the aunt who always gives books.” I think I’d like those words engraved on my tombstone some day.

I love to give books as gifts. As a teacher, that’s part of my M.O. My reputation for giving books has had an impact on my own kids as well. Once, when my son’s friend Brian was buying him a birthday gift, Brian asked his mother, “Shouldn’t we get Seanie something more educational?” Maybe Brian is a teacher in the making.

Having said all that, I struggled recently, when wheeling down the Target aisle, over whether to buy the cute blue jammies or a *Pat the Bunny* boxed set for a new baby. The former is so practical—the latter so potentially pivotal.

I remember my daughter petting each page of *Pat the Bunny* long ago but I can’t recall a single pair of jammies she wore. Jammies fade; books are forever. I snapped up the books.

I am drawn to hardcover books because kids are as turned on by their look and feel as any adult. Children are more likely to have a shelf full of paperbacks, which are less expensive and easier to acquire. Hardcover books are a cut above.

One year my daughter received a hardcover copy of *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister. Taped to the book was a sequiny pen decorated with fish. Years later, that gift stands out in her mind as being “the bomb” (“really good” in 10-year-old speak).

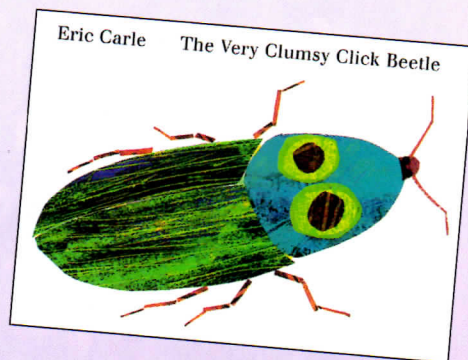
Her affinity for fancy books has not changed, which leads me to the next criterion for choosing a great book gift. At a recent school book sale, my daughter couldn’t keep her hands off “this Harry book.” She didn’t know anything about the story line—she just couldn’t take her eyes off the book’s beauty. I had to buy it. Okay, I didn’t have to buy it, but I guess I was drawn to the packaging, too.

The book turned out to be *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* by J.K. Rowling, the smash hit that has swept the planet and bestseller lists for children and adults. I guess this time we did judge a book by its cover.



Bestseller lists can help narrow the search for a gift book. Web sites such as *barnesandnoble.com*, *borders.com* and *amazon.com* offer lists of what’s hot in children’s literary circles. Rowling’s latest two books, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* have spent a fair share of time on such lists.

If I don’t know the contents of a child’s personal library, I opt for a book with a recent copyright date to avoid giving a redundant gift. Author and illustrator Eric Carle has written some of the most popular children’s books, such as *The Grouchy Ladybug* and *The Very Quiet Cricket*. This year, Carle has come out with *The Very Clumsy Click Beetle*, which is sure to delight readers ages 4 to 8.



For middle readers, Beverly Cleary brings us *Ramona’s World*, her first Ramona book following a 15-year hiatus. And Newbery Medal recipient Karen Hesse offers *A Light in the Storm: The Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin* as part of the *Dear America* series of historical fiction books. Children come to know these two authors intimately in school so their eyes light up

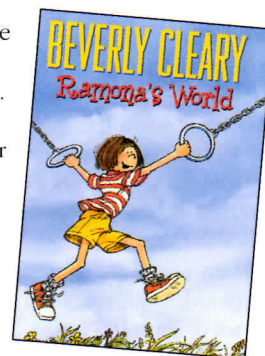
when they receive books by their “favorite” authors.

Even reluctant readers have their champions. Louis Sachar has a knack for reaching young readers via their funny bones.

The author of the ever-popular *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* has a new book, *Holes*, to delight middle readers.

Kids who would rather eat nails than read can enjoy poetry books. These are not your grandmother’s poetry books, mind you. Books such as *No More Homework, No More Tests!* edited by Bruce Lansky and illustrated by Stephen Carpenter and *Don’t Read This Book, Whatever You Do!* by Kalli Dakos and illustrated by G. Brian Karas are pulling in readers with snappy writing served in manageable portions. And, of course, any poetry book by the late Shel Silverstein is a gift indeed.

Giving a book without following up may relegate your gift to the piles of boxes with clothes from well-meaning relatives. Ignite interest in the book you’ve given by talking about it with the child. Don’t stop there—check back in a week to ask about the book and ignite more fire if necessary. This, after all, is how you grow a reader, which is the greatest of gifts.



Mary Anne Duggan is a teacher mentor specialist for the Scottsdale Unified School District and the mother of Taylor, 11, and



Seanie, 8. Reach her by e-mail at bookbag@razkids.com. Our thanks to Barnes and Noble at 90th Street and Shea in Scottsdale, which loaned Duggan the books she reviewed for this article.