

Pile them high; it's summer time

SHEILA WAYMAN

Tue, Jul 13, 2010

School may be over for the summer, but that's no reason for the reading to stop

WITH NO school or homework to interrupt them, summer is invariably a time of great discovery for avid young book readers.

It is a chance to try different kinds of books or wallow in a whole series from a favourite author. Some holidays will forever be associated with who or what you found between those pages.

The only downside is likely to be a nagging parent: "What are you doing indoors on a lovely day like this? Put that book down and go out."

But, according to the director of Children's Books Ireland, Mags Walsh, "If they are happy reading, let them read. Don't put any walls or barriers around it."

Writer Judi Curtin, whose books include the popular Alice and Megan series for children, took every opportunity to read as a child. She remembers that when she was 13 or 14, "my parents despaired of me doing anything except lying on the couch and reading".

"I was an Enid Blyton fan in my day and she goes in and out of fashion. "Vampires are very much in vogue for young readers at the moment," she adds.

Undoubtedly many children will be introduced this summer to *Artemis Fowl*, by Eoin Colfer, which was recently voted as the favourite Puffin book of all time. As a boy growing up in Wexford, Colfer particularly remembers reading *Tom Sawyer*.

"It is the perfect summer book, packed with mischief and adventure," he says. "I think that every boy who ever read *Tom Sawyer* wanted to be him, searching for lost gold, fishing for catfish on the Mississippi and, of course, tricking your friends into doing your chores."

Successful writers were probably all hooked on books from an early age and loved summer reading. But what about children who are reluctant readers? There is a danger their reading abilities will slip during the holidays.

"It is like sport, if you don't keep practising it, you fall out of it," says Walsh. Schools are all too familiar with the need for "reading recovery" come September.

So what can you do to encourage children to keep reading when school is out?

1. Let them choose: Children should be free to select what they want to read, that includes comics and graphic novels, newspapers and magazines, not just books. The important thing is that they enjoy it.

The recently appointed children's laureate, Siobhán Parkinson, advises parents not to be too picky about what the kids are reading over the summer.

"I'm all for exposing kids to quality books, but it is quantity – that avid ingestion of vast numbers of summer reads – that forms the reading habit and turns children into book addicts. And childhood book addicts become lifelong readers. So grit your teeth and let them at it, glitter, vampires, the lot . . ."

In bookshops or libraries, be directed by your child, and resist saying: "There are too many pictures in that for you", or "try this one, it is much better for you".

2. Lead by example: A house full of books encourages children to explore the written word, but even more inspirational is the sight of their parents actually reading them.

"Let them see you reading for leisure," says Curtin, who is a mother of three teenagers. When they were younger, she would say to them on a sunny day: "Let's go out into the garden and we'll all read."

"I could lie in the deck chair and read and call it parenting and was not just indulging myself. They will be suspicious if you don't read yourself. If they see you love it, that's worth 20 lectures."

Walsh echoes the point: "Parents being involved is really important, particularly for anybody aged under 10. And it's really, really important for boys: they need to see dads and brothers enjoying books as it tends to be females in families who read. Girls have plenty of reading role models and boys don't have quite so many."

3. Visit your local library: If your children are not members of the local library, sign them up immediately. Libraries are a wonderful, free (in most areas) resource, not just for books, but also CDs, DVDs and using the internet. Many branches have events running through the summer, such as storytime for younger children, colouring competitions, author talks and book workshops. Junior book clubs for a range of ages are also growing in popularity and usually meet fortnightly or monthly.

A summer reading challenge is run by various libraries, including some in South Dublin, Galway, Waterford and Mayo, whereby children are encouraged to read six or more books over July and August; they receive cards to be stamped and a certificate when it is completed.

See library.ie for contact details of public libraries around the State; most local authority websites have up-to-date information about what is going on in the libraries in their area.

4. Create a reading corner in your house: It is a nice idea to put a couple of bean bag chairs beside a book shelf, where you can cuddle up with younger children for a read or where older ones can go themselves to lounge and lose themselves in a book. Again, it is a good idea if they see parents sit there with their own books from time to time.

5. Be subtle: The more parents push reluctant readers, the less likely they are to develop a love of books – which is the only thing that will keep them reading. Don't be impatient or doubt their abilities; the pace at which children acquire reading skills varies. Just because your friend's child is reading Dickens at age five, does not mean your darling should be too.

However, there is nothing worse than a parent picking up a book a child has chosen and saying “oh you would never be able to manage that”, says Walsh. “They will manage as much as they can and they can always come back to it when they are older.”

Never point out to a young person what their failings are in reading, particularly if they have a reading issue that has been identified in school. “Then they think they have an issue for the rest of their life,” adds Wash, “and that is not the case.”

6. Think outside the book: Any print material is good for children’s literacy, so parents should not obsess about books and frown on, say, comics. The enjoyment of story-telling can be fostered by the use of audio books on long car journeys – or by downloading them onto MP3 players.

The internet is also a print-rich environment, says Dr Therese McPhillips, literary educator at St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Dublin. New technology has wonderful advantages such as instant feedback and visual attraction. Interactive books and e-books are another way of getting them reading.

“Making meaning” is the whole purpose of reading, she points out, and the parent should try to support the child’s comprehension, no matter what the medium.

One of the buzz words in literacy circles is “engagement”, she adds. “If a child is not motivated and not interested, he is not going to see any point in moving from learning to read, to reading to learn.”

swayman@irishtimes.com

THREE TOP IRISH WRITERS RECALL CHILDHOOD SUMMER READING:

CRIME WRITER JOHN CONNOLLY

“We spent our summer holidays with my grandmother down in Ballylongford, Co Kerry. My grandmother had a long bookshelf in the main room of the house, which was where we ate, watched TV, argued – all those things that make summer holidays so special.

“While I would inevitably bring some of my own books to read, usually borrowed from the local library, I was always curious to see what might have been added to my grandmothers shelves, as my aunts and uncles and cousins would all have passed through the house in the interim.

There was a copy of *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, which I was never allowed to read as it was considered a bit suspect, along with *The Tailor And Ansty*, and a couple of John B Keane books. I’m still not sure why they were kept on the shelves and not hidden away if they were supposed to be so risqué, but I suspect they were there just so I could be told not to read them.

“My father would pick a book from my grandmother’s shelves to read during his holiday, the only time that he would read fiction. Once he made the mistake of picking *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves, which took him two summers to read, and was generally considered an error of judgment. The following year he chose *Let’s Hear It For The Deaf Man* by Ed McBain, which was shorter. “I was curious about the title, and when he put it down I began to read it, and it was the first book that we ever fought over. It was also the first mystery novel that I read, and I think it was the first step on the path to my becoming a mystery writer myself.

“The house in Ballylongford is long gone, but bits of its library are still in my old bedroom.”

John Connolly’s latest novel, *The Whisperers*, is published by Hodder Stoughton

NOVELIST JOSEPH O’CONNOR

“I remember a summer in my very early teens – it would have been about 1976 – when I read every Agatha Christie novel I could find in Dún Laoghaire Library, a place I haunted in those days. And earlier summers when I read Richmal Crompton’s “William” books. I am reading them again now with my sons, who are aged 10 and six, and the sly, wry humour of William’s worldview still make me laugh out loud. And Martin Jarvis’s radio versions of the books, available on CD, are really truly wonderful.

“Often in the summers when I was a kid, we would stay with our grandparents for a day or two. All four of them lived on Keeper Road in Crumlin. I remember the strange pleasure of exploring their bookshelves, the beauty of old books and yellowing newspapers. There would be faded copies of *The Bell* and maybe a Robert Louis Stevenson novel or an edition of Moore’s *Melodies* or a tattered almanac. My paternal grandparents had a very old book called *A Cabinet of Irish Literature* – with the rather grand subtitle of “Selections from the Works of The Chief Poets, Orators and Prose Writers of Ireland” – and browsing through its ancient pages was thrilling.

“It’s hard to believe it nowadays, but summer childcare in the 1970s consisted largely of your mother telling you in the mornings to remove yourself from the house and not come back until teatime. As a bookish kid, it seemed important to always have something to read on those long afternoons. My parents loved reading and there were lots of books in the house, mainly Irish fiction and folklore.

“As a young teenager it would have been books like the inexpensive collections of Irish short stories published at the time by Poolbeg Press. I had a couple of school friends who were great readers, really committed and interested, and we’d swop books in a disorganised but enthusiastic way. I remember now that we all loved the poems of Patrick Kavanagh, and his characterisations of a summery Dublin that had once been “leafy with love” really stirred the teenage heart.

“My 10-year-old son James is a wonderful reader, with a memory I find amazing. He loves Rick Riordan and I’m reading those books with him this summer, and loving them.”

Joseph O’Connor’s latest novel, *Ghost Light*, is published by Harvill Secker

CHILDREN’S LAUREATE AND WRITER SIOBHÁN PARKINSON

“We were sent off in the summertime to our grandparents, who lived in Bray. My Bray grandmother had a health thing about “sea bathing” as it was called then, and we had to “go for a dip” every day to get our ration of ozone or iodine or whatever was in vogue at the time for children. I remember shivering and dripping on those big round stones of Bray beach and trying to get sticky wet sand out of my underwear, but then on the way home, our hair thick with salt, we would take the long way round via the library to change our books. Heaven! Another habit of my grandmother’s, a sacred ritual in fact, was her afternoon nap. We had to have a nap too, that was the routine. Heaven again, because this meant a whole hour of uninterrupted reading – wedges of *What Katy Did* while my grandmother snoozed in the next room.”

© 2010 The Irish Times