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Inculcating a Love for Reading

Children's books that might help repel the armies of electronic distraction

By MEGHAN COX GURDON

Anyone who spent half of childhood curled up with a book knows the special urgency of wanting to pass that experience on. People who came late to reading are often even more determined than early bookworms to press upon later generations that one, glorious book that first opened the world of letters to them.

For many adults this natural desire is today intensified by the fatal allure of electronic entertainments. Panicky parents everywhere worry that if they don't inculcate a love of reading, and soon, their little ones will be sucked entirely into a hyperlinked, pixilated future. With children ages 2-5 now spending 32 hours a week watching television, as a recent Nielsen study found, it is no idle fear.

"Reading books of any kind simply makes a child's mind sharper," writes the actor Kirk Douglas in "Everything I Need to Know I Learned From a Children's Book" (Roaring Brook, 233 pages, $29.99), a delightful nostalgic exercise in which prominent people reflect on the children's stories that shaped them. Touchingly, Mr. Douglas, who is 92, best remembers the experience of his sister Betty reading aloud to him from "The Bobbsey Twins," a series that started in 1904.

Other contributors include Peter Matthiessen, the nature writer and novelist, who describes how Rudyard Kipling's "Just-So Stories" instilled in him "the yearning for wild places and wild experiences that was to become so important in my life." Comedian Jay Leno, an early cut-up, recounts feeling validated by Virginia Lee Burton's "Mike Mulligan and the Steam Shovel." One sentence in particular resonated: "The more people came, the faster Mike Mulligan and Mary Ann dug." That line, Mr. Leno says, "made sense to me. I was always a show-off. The more of an audience I had, the more I'd act up.'"

"Everything I Need" (edited by Anita Silvey) is for browsing, with entries that show a familiar storybook cover, a page of illustrated text and a notable person's musings. Leafing through these handsome pages is so pleasant that it scarcely matters if some of the notable-person insights are rather banal: Children's books, we're told, "not only inform and entertain" but can "change people's lives with the power of the pen" and "truly have a formative effect."

Yes, indeed! But of course first you have to get the rascals to want to read. For that, **educational consultant Diane W. Frankenstein** recommends that parents make a point of talking over stories with their children. In **"Reading Together"** (Perigee, 279 pages, $15) the author has assembled précis of 101 children's stories, grouped by age-appeal, with advice for how to talk with children about them. Of Leo Leonni's "Frederick," about an idle wool-gathering mouse, she suggests: "Do you know anyone who is a dreamer or a poet? Are you a dreamer?"

The book has a cheerful, chatty tone—each selection contains a story synopsis, questions about the characters and a list of related titles—and yet there is also something poignant here. In beseeching parents to make conversation with their children, and reminding them to "be patient" and "try listening," the author hints at an impoverishment in American homes that has come, perhaps, with all those TV hours logged by Nielsen.

The creators of "1001 Children's Books You Must Read Before You Grow Up" (Universe, 960 pages, $36.95), meanwhile, evidently expect children to read like mad—how else to consume so many books?—and to possess powerful, beefy forearms. Weighing in at 2.2 pounds, this handsome, glossy lump would work as well as a doorstop as it does as a portal to children's literature around the world.

These pages, too, bring happy flashes of recognition as we're reunited with half-forgotten tales from childhood ("Caps for Sale") and reminded of more recent arrivals ("The Invention of Hugo Cabret"). But "1001 Children's Books"—which was put together by Julia Eccleshare, the children's book editor at Britain's Guardian newspaper— goes well beyond what is normally available to English-speaking children. It includes books published originally in Japanese, Slovakian, Italian, Chinese, Swedish, Russian and Dutch.

And, happily, what the Internet taketh, by tempting children away from reading, it giveth back to parents, by making it easy for them to locate obscure books that might be otherwise be impossible to find. Only a few of the 1,001 titles may be too great a nuisance to obtain. I searched but could not find for sale any English-language copies of a Czech classic, "Kubula and Kuba Kubikula," praised here as a "grotesque story of overcoming fear and finding one's place in the world."

These three volumes about children's books would fit nicely on a shelf already holding Jim Trelease's "The Read-Aloud Handbook," first published in 1979; Mem Fox's "Reading Magic," from 2001; and Pam Allyn's "What to Read When," which came out in April.

Some offerings in this mini-genre are more stylish than others, but all represent a cri de coeur on behalf not just of children's literature but of children's hearts and imaginations. Surely that is territory worth defending from the armies of electronic usurpers.

—Mrs. Gurdon writes about children's books regularly for the Journal.