



Hal's Reading Diary - March 2004

Article Author:

[Roger Mills](#) [1]

[145](#) [2]

Article Category:

Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

Roger Mills on how Hal no longer depends on pictures in books.

Hal is now three and has begun to follow a narrative without depending on illustrations for help. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.<!--break-->

In my last diary entry I was describing Hal's Oedipal desire to have my wife Jo all to himself, and to get me out of the picture. Pushing me away had meant that I hadn't been able to read to Hal very much in the last few months of last year.

Over the Christmas holidays Jo and I started talking about the situation that was developing and we decided we must do something to change things. 'He hardly sees you apart from at weekends,' Jo argued. 'Spend some time on your own with him and see if that makes a difference.' The holidays presented us with the perfect opportunity to put this plan into action. I started taking Hal off swimming, or taking him to Drusilla's, a local children's zoo. Pretty quickly these 'boys only' outings brought about a change in Hal's attitude to me. Whereas before it had been 'Go away daddy, I don't want you,' now it was 'You're lovely daddy', or 'You're my best friend?'. On one, admittedly isolated, occasion he woke in the night calling for me rather than his mummy.

This brief vignette of the shifting dynamics of my household is by way of explaining that now, after a hiatus of several months, I have been reading books with Hal again. And the break has thrown up an interesting discovery. Hal no longer depends on pictures to find a book interesting.

I noticed it first when he picked out a title called **Five Minute Monster Tales** for his bedtime book. I hadn't seen the book before and when I opened it my first thought was that his interest in it would not last beyond the first page. **Five Minute Monster Tales** has pictures, it is true, but there is only one, smallish one per page marooned in substantial amounts of text, and they don't really illustrate the most dramatic elements of the story either.

I asked Hal if he was sure that he really wanted to read this book. He insisted he did so we read through one of the tales. Hal sat, listening carefully, looking at the pictures but not paying particular attention to them. It was obvious that he was attending to the narrative I was reading to him, and when I had finished he asked me to read him the next one.

Before pressing on though, I was curious to find out how much he had taken in. Afterwards I felt mildly guilty about this reaction. But it was such a new idea for me to think that Hal could take in a story if it was told principally through words rather than with a great deal of assistance from the images, that I couldn't help feeling sceptical about how much he had really understood. My doubts were completely misplaced. When I asked Hal a few questions about the story it was obvious he had understood exactly what had happened. It was me that had got things wrong.

This feels like such an important change. And it seems obvious that a deepening ability with language is the sine qua non for this development in Hal. A year ago, I would argue, many words were, for Hal, just sounds. As such they couldn't work as symbols of anything. As his grasp of language has developed, his store of symbols 'word x equals thing y ' becomes much bigger. And so the possibility of words conjuring images and narratives in his mind is born.

From a distance it seems such a normal little thing, that a child can start to take in stories told through words. But in terms of a mind's development it is a shift of huge importance. The beginning, I would argue, of real thinking, and real imagination.

Roger Mills is a Psychodynamic Counsellor.

Page Number:

16

Source URL (retrieved on Oct '20): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/145/childrens-books/articles/hals-diary-and-baby-diary/hals-reading-diary-march-2004>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/roger-mills>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/145>