



Hal's Reading Diary ? September 2006

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Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

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Roger Mills on Hal's science library.

Hal is now five years and eight months and the idea of being a scientist appeals to him. His father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.

One morning recently Hal suddenly appeared downstairs wearing a white shirt belonging to Jo over his clothes. When we asked him why he had the shirt on he explained that it was actually a white coat. 'I am a scientist,' he said. 'I'm going to set up a laboratory and I need a clip board and science books.'

We went upstairs to Hal's bedroom and started looking through his bookshelves. He has a number of the Kingfisher 'I Wonder Why?' series and various of these (on Snakes, Stars, the Sun and the Sea) were put aside to go into his 'science library'. A little more digging around then unearthed a Dorling Kindersley book by Carol Vorderman titled **How Mathematics Works**. This didn't seem promising at first, but looking inside Hal came across a chapter devoted to setting up a home laboratory picturing items from calculators to straws that the budding scientist would need. Hal was off, and spent the next hour or so assembling his different bits and pieces, and hugely enjoying himself.

Later in the day I asked Hal what had made him interested in being a scientist. He didn't really know and neither did Jo with any certainty. Piecing it together we remembered that he had been very impressed by a visit to a science centre at the Herstmonceux Observatory in East Sussex, and that he also seemed pretty keen on white coated figures like the scientists in the Spiderman movie. And then there is the fact that Hal is always doing 'experiments', usually ghastly concoctions of things found in the garden, mixed together with water which have to be very carefully monitored in case he attempts to smuggle them indoors.

Thinking about Hal's fantasies of being a scientist brought to mind a childhood memory of my own. This was an occasion when I had a 'war' with the daffodils in our garden, cutting down great clumps of them with a stick. What came back to me particularly about this was the feeling that I had while I was doing it. The daffodils were my 'enemies' and cutting them down I imagined myself a cavalry officer at the battle of Waterloo. I felt a thrilling, albeit rather sentimentalised, sense of strength and bravery. When I was attacking the daffodils I became a brave boy/soldier and had feelings that I didn't normally have.

It seems to me that when Hal imagines himself a scientist, something similar is happening. When Hal becomes a scientist he has feelings that are different from normal, feelings that are good. It is difficult to establish exactly what these sensations are; five-year-olds don't have the kind of introspective powers to be able to report on this. But you can imagine that they are to do with making discoveries, and transforming things and also, dare I say it, feeling that he is controlling things and making things happen.

I think that at all stages of life this kind of fantasy identification is hugely important because it allows us to tap into parts of ourselves which we haven't developed. And in childhood and teens fantasy identification is even more important, because this is the period, more than any other, when we are trying out different versions of ourselves to see which one

feels best. Books are crucial in all this. Not the only resource of course, but a vitally important one if the habit of using books is in place. It really excites me that Hal saw books as a key component in his science fantasy. And if he ends up donning a white coat when it comes to his working life we will have, in a small way, Carol Vorderman to thank for some early inspiration.

How Mathematics Works by Carol Vorderman (a DK 'Eyewitness Science Guide') is now out of print but available via Amazon.

28 titles in the Kingfisher 'I Wonder Why?' series are available at £4.99 each pbk.

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