



Two Children Tell: Rebecca and Literary Language

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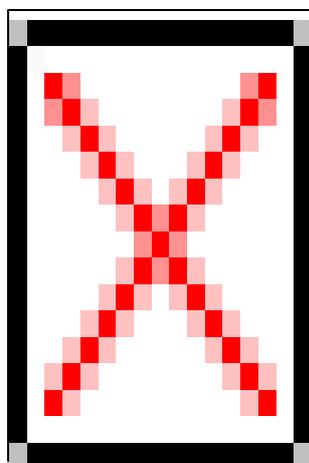
[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

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Byline:

Rebecca's literary language

In the latest of her series describing children's early responses to stories and language, Virginia Lowe describes how being read to enriched her daughter Rebecca's language.



"?Couldn't you hum it quietly to yourself?" Rebecca asked. She, at three years, one month, (3y1m), had been refused a third story from **Father Bear Comes Home** (Minarik/Sendak). It was time to prepare lunch.

This is a quote from **Winnie-the-Pooh** (Milne), the chapter "Eeyore has a Birthday" heard (for the umpteenth time, it was a great favourite) earlier that morning. In the story it comes when Pooh, trying to understand Eeyore, sings him "Cottleston Pie" "Ask me a riddle and I'll reply: / Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie". He sings one verse and "[w]hen he had finished it, Eeyore didn't actually say that he didn't like it, so Pooh very kindly sang the second verse to him". After it "Eeyore still said nothing at all, so Pooh hummed the third verse quietly to himself."

It made me realise how literary language enriches child-language. I didn't for a minute expect that Rebecca saw the irony in Pooh's determination to sing his song through despite Eeyore's unresponsive grumpiness. She couldn't have been amused in the way an adult is, but nevertheless, I was unresponsive to her request for a third story, and this probably brought the quote to mind, or maybe just its pertinence.

There are advantages in reading the book's actual words to a young child. When they are used to hearing blocks of text from picture books, their concentration grows and they can eventually listen to longer stories, such as a chapter of Pooh, which sometimes has just one sketch per opening. The child's imagination has to create the action, and the words can offer wonderful phrases.

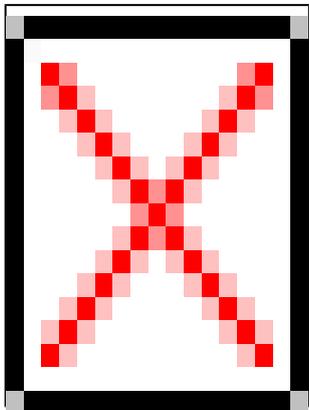
Many people choose not to read the actual words of a book until the child can speak. Instead they play the labelling game, even up until age two or three. "Look at the dog?", "Can you find the shoe?" "Where is that bird going?" This is good fun too of course, and the child is learning, and using their language ability, as the parents constantly increase the complexity of their questions in line with the child's growing ability.

But we preferred to actually read the words. The children didn't always understand them, but nor did they understand the everyday talk around them, especially as infants. However they were learning new words constantly, long before

they could talk. 'Don't tell me all about it. Just read it to me!' Rebecca (2y7m) complained as I picked up a new library book and started talking about the pictures.

A child who is used to hearing the words rather than just playing the labelling game, may chase you around the house begging for another book, and listen to as many as you are prepared to read. Both Rebecca and Nicholas had early, within their very small spoken vocabulary, a plea for books. 'Wead, wead' Rebecca would demand holding one out enticingly (1y6m), and 'Book, book' from Nicholas (1y7m).

Rebecca particularly enjoyed the words and phrases that were not in our family lexicon 'fortnight', 'mackintosh',



'camomile tea', 'elegant uncomfortable clothes' and 'Where are we going this nice fine day?' were all collected from Beatrix Potter or A A Milne 'used, chanted, quoted, rolled around in her mouth for sheer pleasure at two. When Rebecca was sure she knew the answer, she would come and ask me, for example, 'What does fortnight mean?' often weeks after she had started saying it. When stories are simplified by either parent or publisher this delight in language is sacrificed.

They are hearing new and extended language in unusual patterns. When you read aloud the words are more emphasised and clearer, the inflection more pronounced 'literary language sounds quite different to ordinary conversation. We moved to Melbourne when Rebecca was just 2y0m. People at playgroup and elsewhere remarked on her 'English accent'. I was puzzled at first 'both parents have an average Australian accent. But one evening as I listened to her father reading to her, I realised that her spoken language was modelled on the best in her environment 'the literary language read aloud. She had by then learned to speak in sentences, and had many big words in her vocabulary.

Ultimately when they start to learn to read, the literary language is not foreign but familiar. They might or might not learn to read early. They will learn in their own time, nothing surer, if they have become addicted to story in its printed form.

While they are learning it is vitally important that you continue reading aloud. Remind them constantly why they are going through this difficult process 'it's not so they will get a good job as adults, but because stories are such fun that they need to be able to read them for themselves. Read them novels and series, and keep reading at least until they can read independently at their interest level.

You are giving them a gift 'a lifelong passion for stories, and a fascination with words.

Dr. Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids' Book](#) [3], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

Books mentioned:

Winnie-the-Pooh A A Milne, Egmont, 978-1-4052-8131-7, £8.99 pbk

When We Were Very Young, A A Milne, Egmont, 978-1405281300, £8.99 pbkk

Father Bear Comes Home, Else Holmelund Minarik, Maurice Sendak, Red Fox, 978-1782955054, £5.99 pbk

The Tale of Peter Rabbit, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne, 978-0-7232-4770-8, £5.99 hbk

The Tale of Tom Kitten, Beatrix Potter, Frederick Warne, 978-0-2412-5293-2, £6.99 hbk

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