



Hal's Reading Diary - May 2004

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Article Category:

Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

Roger Mills on telling stories to Hal.

Hal is now three and a quarter and stories in which he has the starring role are in demand. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.<!--break-->

In my last entry I was describing how Hal is now connecting increasingly with the narratives in stories and, as a result, he is nothing like as dependent on a book offering lots of pictures to maintain his interest. These days he sits and listens for the story. Indeed it seems pretty clear to me that the story has now become for him far and away the most important bit of a book.

In keeping with this he has recently started asking my wife Jo to tell him a story when they are driving in the car. Hal gives her a start by telling her who he wants to have in it, and also, the opening plot development. Almost without exception Hal's dramatis personae feature himself, his best friend from Nursery, Louis, and a figure of evil ? a ?nasty giant? or sometimes a ?naughty pirate?. The plot starter is fairly predictable too. The forces of evil figure has abducted Louis (Hal always seems to exempt himself from this fate) and it is down to Hal to sort things out. Over to you Mummy.

Hal's scenario, of course implies the rest of the tale and Jo duly provides it with the forces of evil being overcome by plucky young Hal. In one way or another, the nasty giant or naughty pirate finds himself outmanoeuvred and then punished and told he must never do it again. The invariable final scene has a tired but happy Hal and Louis making their way home to tea and then bed. When Jo was telling me about these stories the impish part of my mind wondered about giving a narrative an unhappy ending ? the giant locks Hal and Louis up in his castle for ever perhaps. But as soon as I imagined trying this out on Hal it was obvious that I would never dream of doing it. The pressure to make the story console your child, to convince him or her that bad will always be overcome is so huge. It feels as if you are dealing with your child's internal sense of safety.

Hal's infantile narrative isn't that different, in essence, from many of the narratives adults consume. How much fiction, how many movies feature the same basic plotline of good overcoming evil and making the world a safe and decent place. Just think of two recent blockbusters ? **The Lord of the Rings** films and the Harry Potter books. The basic driving tension behind both sets of stories is good versus evil with good always winning out in the end. I suppose it is just possible that J K Rowling is preparing to shock the world by having Voldemort kill off Harry at the end of Book 7 but would her readers ever forgive her for it?

In one way it seems strange that these stories of wish fulfilment, which have so little to do with the way much of life actually happens, should be hungrily consumed by adults who in much of the rest of their lives can be rational and realistic. But maybe the answer lies in an existential point. If growing up is seen as, amongst other things, a struggle to feel safe, it would go a long way to explain why narratives of safety threatened but ultimately restored are so compelling. You might say that humans need two kinds of stories: ones that show us how things actually are, and ones that dramatise for us, and then resolve, the internal tensions in our psyches. Hal's little tales of good outdoing evil are, I

would argue, a part of what makes life feel safe to him. And I don't imagine him becoming interested in the realist breed of fiction for many a long year.

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