



Hal's Reading Diary - March 2011

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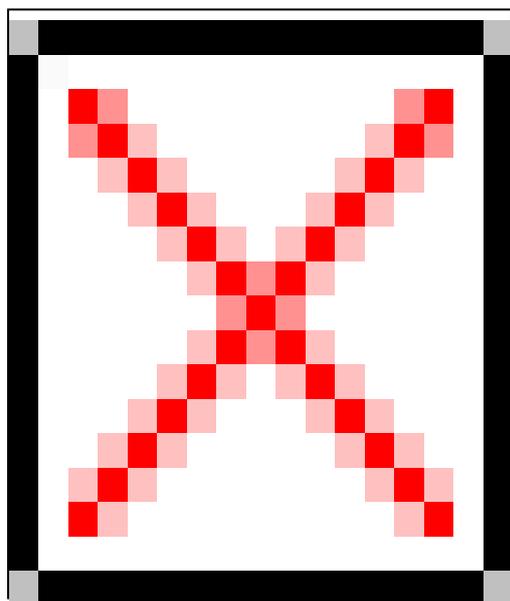
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Article Category:

Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

Roger Mills investigates the appeal of **Diary of a Wimpy Kid** to Hal.



As if to prove his father wrong about his lack of interest in reading, 10-year-old Hal has found a book he can't put down. What is it about it that has caught his imagination? His father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains?

In the last issue of **BfK** I was lamenting Hal's lack of enthusiasm for reading. Too much like hard work for him, I complained; he never reads voluntarily; you never see him reading to himself. And then, as if to prove me wrong, the next thing I knew Hal had become fixated on a book.

The title in question, **Diary of a Wimpy Kid ? the Ugly Truth** was a birthday present and no sooner had Hal dipped into it than he was hooked. At night Hal would volunteer to read **Wimpy Kid** to us. This was unheard of. And then having done the reading out loud bit, he would pass on being read to in order to be able to carry on reading quietly to himself. Unheard of again. One morning I even found Hal reading at breakfast whilst eating his cereal. The idea that I ought to reprimand him for bad manners flickered briefly in my brain, but I was so thrilled to see him reading I abandoned it, delighting instead at the sight of my very absorbed son.

Clearly **Wimpy Kid** has touched parts of Hal's mind that nothing else he has encountered so far has and I asked him what it was about the book that had him so keen to read. Hal listed a number of things ? he liked the fact that the book was about a kid whose life was recognisably like his own (interestingly Hal was mildly scathing of fantasy fiction worlds when making this point); he liked the characters and the story lines (lots of short episodes rather than a tale driven by any big, dominant tension like so many we read). But the real key to Hal's enthusiasm was clear, I think, from the amount of chuckling that was going on. Hal found/finds the book hilarious, and it was the humour that he couldn't put down.

I asked Hal which bits he found particularly funny and, there was actually quite a range. But the type of humour that produced the deepest laughs was invariably the scatological stuff. At one point in the book Gregg, the hero, and his mates play a game where they have to photo a part of someone from very close range and then another team has to guess who it is. Gregg's gang photograph the crook of someone's elbow in a way that makes it look like a bottom. The presiding teacher is initially outraged and then spluttering and embarrassed when he realises his misreading. Hal found the whole episode richly comic, as he did the series of fart jokes which came up next.

Bottoms, farts, poo ? they are such a staple for 10-year-old comedy but why, I started to wonder, do boys like Hal find this kind of thing so killingly funny? The conclusion that I came to (and I don't think it is a very original one) is that it is really to do with shame. At some stage fairly early on in our lives we learn that things to do with waste production are dirty and disgusting. It's OK to do them behind closed doors, but it is not OK to do them in public. If you are unlucky enough to make a noise, or smell, or worse in public you are likely to ribbed mercilessly for it. It becomes a nightmare experience we all hope won't happen to us. Even now, as therapist, I occasionally wonder, with some trepidation, how on earth I would handle it if I broke wind in a session.

So my take on fart jokes is that boys of Hal's age (and if we are honest people from lots of other age groups too) find them so funny because they sort of detoxify a source of shame. Hal hates it if Jo or I come into the bathroom when he is on the loo now. He's been like this for perhaps three or four years. The shame about waste functions is very alive in him as it is in most people. But it is delightful to laugh at things that we might be mortified by if they happened to us in normal, serious, life.

Poo and bum jokes aren't the only reason why Hal loves the **Wimpy Kid** so. They are just one of the forms of humour on offer in the book. I'll have a look at some of the other intoxicants in the next diary.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid ? the Ugly Truth by Jeff Kinney is published by Puffin (978 0 14 133198 0) at £10.99.

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