

it in library lessons. Written for an early childhood audience, Parsley Rabbit walks us through a book that is all about books and along the way he points out the title, endpapers, spine, the way the words move from left to right on a page, and the many more parts and workings of a book. Utterly brilliant. *Lucy's Book* introduces young readers from early childhood to middle primary to the concept of libraries but also the idea that a book can be loved by many and is a resource to be shared. Even if I were not pictured in this book (complete with pink hair and some of my favourite clothes!), this would be the best book I have found that captures the essence of libraries and love for a special book.

READERS VERSUS LIBRARY BOOKS

I often have parents visit my school library early in the year to find books that their child will be able to read by themselves. I relish the opportunity to launch into my spiel about the difference between 'learn to read' books (teacher-chosen levelled readers) and recreational books (self-selected library books). Term One of the first year of school is completely overwhelming for students, staff and parents, and each year I think that I would dearly love to sit 'new to the school system' parents down with a cup of tea and possibly some Persian love cake spiced with saffron, rose, cardamom and lemon (I digress), and talk them through the differences between classroom readers and recreational reads. Instead, while I have you here, make yourself a tea, grab a slice of cake and settle in.

Once phonics instruction is underway and parents are having endless 'fun, fun, fun for everyone' with sight word games, the next level of reading instruction is added to the homework folder – the home reader. Readers are short texts, specifically designed for the purpose of teaching reading.

To the capable adult reader they may appear dull and

uninteresting, but to the child learning to read they are just about the most wonderful thing in the world. Classroom readers are designed as teaching tools, with high-frequency sight words, simple sentences, predictable storylines, pictures which help to decode the text and a levelled system where books increase in difficulty as reading mastery is achieved. It is widely accepted that the early years of reading instruction are crucial in developing proficient readers, and classroom readers form part of the 'learn to read toolkit', alongside a suite of other strategies and ongoing monitoring of student progress.³

By week two of term the library lessons start, and library bags full of big picture books are dragged home like treasure sacks. The sheer volume of texts coming through your house in those early primary schools years can be *overwhelming*. Even I, a teacher librarian, find the number of library books formidable at times.

Books borrowed from libraries are self-selected, recreational reads and help young people develop an emotional attachment to reading and develop lifelong reading habits. Picture books and early chapter books are complex interplays between words and text, and require young people to think deeply, imagine, wonder and interpret. They contain sophisticated language that requires discussion and increases your child's vocabulary. They are also full of images that add to and extend the text.

Young people need both classroom readers and recreational reads – each supports the other and each has a distinct purpose. Classroom readers are great for using as part of your child's homework routine, where a parent or caregiver can support the reader in feeling a sense of accomplishment as they decode words and make meaning from a text. They are used in the classroom context to teach specific skills, to model writing styles, and to test reading ability. Teachers will have a goal in mind for each child: lower level readers help to develop confidence and fluency, while higher level readers extend

and challenge – both are of critical importance in helping children become independent readers. Quality early childhood teachers are to be trusted; they are experts in what each student needs in a school or home reader. So don't change your child's reader level without first discussing your concerns with the teacher.

Books that your child has chosen from the library are for sharing with a loved adult and are usually a read-aloud experience until your child is reading independently. Even then, reading aloud is something which I encourage well into the upper primary years and beyond.

Focusing on developing a sense of joy around reading, rather than on what level your child is reading and where their peers are at, is so very important. Over-focusing on home readers and turning them into a battle can turn a love of reading into an intense dislike, as perfectly captured in the gorgeous picture book *I Do Not Like Books Anymore!* (Daisy Hirst). Unless there are diagnosed literacy issues, all children will learn to read at some point, but the journey often determines the strength of the outcome and those children who associate books with joy will always come out on top.

Award-winning children's author Pamela Rushby can write the most insanely beautiful prose, but often I find her name on a very 'constrained' levelled reader. I asked her about why and how she writes in these vastly different ways.

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Pamela Rushby

I've been writing for both trade and educational publishers for more than twenty years and in that time I've had over 200 educational books published. Which sounds impressive until you remember that some of these books are only about eight pages long, and might contain only twenty (or fewer) words. These, believe it or not, are the hardest ones of all to write.

Trade books are the ones you'll find in bookshops, as well as public and

school libraries. They're recreational reading: books you choose and love to read. Educational books are largely found in classrooms.

If you looked at a number of trade books and educational books lined up on a shelf, you might not be able to see much of a difference between them. They're all attractive to children, they're entertaining, they're colourful, they're well edited, they're well illustrated. But there is a difference. Educational books are carefully designed, by educational experts, to give children in classrooms practice in reading, to introduce them to new ideas and concepts, to develop reading skills, to build confidence, and to put children's learning into a broad context.

For a writer, choosing to write for the educational market is a whole different ballgame to choosing to write for trade.

A friend of mine once said that a writer's brain is like a lava lamp. At the bottom there's a whole gooey, pulsating mass of thoughts and ideas. Every once in a while, one idea might go *bloop!* and rise to the top. You'll think about it for a while, it'll change shape, perhaps get bigger, another idea might join onto it. Then it'll sink to the bottom again. But one day, that idea will rise to the top and won't go away, and you'll think, *Aha! There's a story!*

That's the way it works when I write for the trade market. I start out with an idea I've had. It's been blooping around in the lava lamp for quite a while, growing and developing. When it's ready to go, I'll know, because it just won't go away. And soon I'll be writing that story, because I desperately want to write it. (And fingers crossed a publisher will, eventually, want it too.)

When I write for the educational market I'm almost always writing commissioned material. A publisher has decided to produce a new series of books and invited writers to contribute to the series. The publisher will have an absolutely clear idea of what the series is intending to achieve, and the writer will receive a brief that outlines the publisher's needs and expectations. Let me give you an example.

A brief I received for some beginner reading books asked me to write a story about 'weather and its effect on people'. I had 120 to 150 words to do this. I needed to include certain high-frequency words at least eight times

in the text. I also needed to include a phonic element and/or a vocabulary element from a given list. Oh, and it would be nice, the brief concluded, if I could manage to be funny, too.

Quite a challenge.

After a lot of thought and juggling of ideas and words (and a certain amount of whingeing, whining and despair), it was possible. I did it.

The trick is to approach a brief as if it's a puzzle to be solved. It may take some time, but, like a cryptic crossword, it can be done. It's a totally different way of writing from coming up with your own idea and developing your own story exactly as you want it to be.

One of the misconceptions people have about educational books is that they're boring. Well, in the past some certainly were. You may have memories of some of them. (*See Spot run. Run, Spot, run.*) But writers now see it as a challenge to make the books fun as well as meeting their educational aims. The one I'm working on features Spacegirl, a superhero who saves the universe by lassoing planets. I'm restricted to a very limited vocabulary and word count, (similar to the *See Spot Run* books), but I'm having fun with it – and I hope the kids will enjoy them too.

Usually editors from the publishing house will provide suggested topics to write about, although I've found editors to be very open to any suggestions I make too. And boring? Never! In the past few years I've written about the scariest theme park ride in the world; why cows' burps are increasing the levels of greenhouse gases in New Zealand; aquanauts living under the sea for extended periods; and high fashion for dogs – all have been total fun to research and write about.

When your beloved child comes home from school and presents you with the evening's homework reading, you can be assured that they are going to gain from that reading. Because to produce the 50 or so words in that little book, a lot of people – educational experts, designers, editors, illustrators, and writers – have put in a lot of time and effort to deliver a meaningful learning experience.

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