

Tell Me a Story

BY JESSICA ALLEN

Every afternoon when I pick him up from preschool, my son greets me with four words: “Tell me a story.” Rain or shine, drinking a juice or eating a cracker, my kid wants to hear a tale as we walk home. “Please,” he pleads. “But don’t start with, ‘Once upon a time.’”

Debates rage about whether being a parent helps or hinders creativity. After a 2013 article in *The Atlantic* suggested that one child might be the optimal amount for writers, the internet went into a frenzy. *White Teeth* author Zadie Smith commented that “two kids entertaining each other in one room gives their mother in another room a surprising amount of free time she would not have otherwise.” She also noted that Charles Dickens sired 10.

I wrote constantly during my son’s infancy and toddlerhood. In fact, I joked that if I’d known my child would be such a good source of copy, I would have gotten pregnant much sooner. As my baby transformed into a boy, however, my words stopped flowing. My pitches got ignored like a too-worn lovey, my ideas drifted away like a lost balloon.

My writer’s block was due to the usual issues: a demanding day job, aging relatives, overarching worries about the world. Furthermore, a 4-year-old was proving far more labor-intensive than a 4-month-old. Each time I sat down to write, I brought all this to the blank page; in return, I was left with nothing but blankness.

Meanwhile, my son discovered that Mom and Dad could supplement the books he loved. He’d ask for a story about a cyclops who flies airplanes, for example, or what Miss Viola Swamp would do if she met a Velociraptor. At first, these requests scared me. I didn’t write fiction; I wrote nonfiction—or used to, before I started to feel as if I no longer had anything to say. How could I give him what he wanted?

Desk chairs don’t care if we don’t show up. Kids, on the other hand, do. Woe to me if I claimed tiredness or emails to answer. Unlike my husband, who has both a great memory and a Ph.D. in literature, I tend to forget even the basic outline of “Little Red Riding Hood.” Trying to be a present parent meant I couldn’t blame “story block.” Instead, I had to dig deep—really deep. So dig I

did, where I found a story about a cat who eats cherry pie on the Long Island Railroad, then another about a robot who fuels up on lava from Mount Fuji.

A few weeks ago, I was in the middle of a story about Yoda’s 372nd birthday party and didn’t notice a bike messenger nearby as I described a cake that



morphed into everyone’s favorite flavor as soon as they took a bite. When the light changed, the bike messenger blocked our path and gave me a thumbs up. “Dude, Yoda’s birthday,” he chuckled. I looked at my son. “Thumbs up, Mommy,” he said.

Telling stories on the street brought the words back everywhere else. My kid didn’t care that Luke Skywalker and Rey couldn’t be Hansel and Gretel’s parents, didn’t mind that the *deus ex machina* was inevitably a bullet train. What mattered was that I took a breath and began.

Bestseller Justin Cronin got the idea for *The Passage* when his daughter, then age 9, asked him to write something less “boring” than his previously published novels. Who knows? Perhaps my next piece will feature an Allosaurus who eats an octopus with a knife and fork, or a boy who helped his mother just by being himself.

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