

between THE LINES

WHEN LINDY ALEXANDER STARTED READING TO HER YOUNG SON, SHE NEVER EXPECTED SHE WOULD BE THE ONE BEING EDUCATED.

It's a request that becomes more insistent as the day goes on. "Read, Mummy," my two-year-old says to me as I come downstairs in the morning. His gentle appeal becomes more insistent throughout the day. "Mummy come read, now!" This boy of mine gulps books down, no matter how many we read back to back. It's hard to keep up with his appetite.

I picked up Pamela Allen's *Black Dog* for \$2 at a local op shop. My son loves the grainy pictures and story of a little girl, Christina, who lives in a house in the woods with her trusty companion Black Dog. Each day, Christina and Black Dog leave chunks of bread out for the birds. The autumn leaves begin to fall and eventually the season loses its colour to the coming winter. Then one day Christina sees a flash. It is a beautiful blue bird and every day Christina tries to lure the bird back with pieces of bread from her dwindling loaf. There is no room for Black Dog at the window as Christina keeps watch for the blue bird.

My son snuggles into me as I turn the last few pages. He knows what's coming. Christina grows thinner by the day and just as she hears a rustling and sees a tree branch move, she rushes outside, only to find Black Dog on the ground. He has climbed a tree and tried to fly. She brings him inside. His heart is beating fast. "Black Dog," she whispers, "I love you."

I have read these lines over and over to my son, but each time I am caught by what is unsaid. As my little boy scoots off my knee and over to the bookshelf to choose another book, I sit still. This story circles around a reminder to us adults. Beware, it seems to say. Shiny, new things like the blue bird can capture your eye, but you pursue it at the risk of ignoring the devoted and loyal shadow of Black Dog. You can easily lose the fast-beating heart for just a glimpse of something that may not even exist.

What I'm learning as I read to my son is that these books whittle down the complexity of the world and offer it back to us in a rhythm and shape that is kid-sized. And the thing about children's books is that they can be deceptive.

In fact, they are a lot like children themselves. Small, playful and seemingly simple, more often than not there is great depth and emotion between the lines. As C. S. Lewis said, "A children's story that can only be

enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest."

My son was still tiny when I bought him the last book published by Dr Seuss. Though truth be told, I'm sure I would have bought it even if I didn't have my son. Reading aloud from *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* reminds me of some fundamental truths, albeit in anapestic tetrameter. "And when you're alone, there's a very good chance you'll meet things that scare you right out of your

pants. There are some, down the road between hither and yon, that can scare you so much you won't want to go on. But on you will go though the weather be foul... On and on you will hike and I know you'll hike far and face up to your problems whatever they are."

Just as Max in *Where the Wild Things Are* subdues the yellow-toothed monsters by holding up a hand and commanding them to "Be still!", the little boy in *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* is self-reliant and keeps walking despite life's ups and downs. We are told that "Out there things can happen and frequently do to people as brainy and footsy as you. And when things start to happen, don't worry. Don't stew. Just go right along. You'll start happening, too." They are comforting words, meant, I suspect, for those of us getting a chance at a second childhood.

It's not all poignant moments, however. My son and I have been steadily working our way through the *Mr. Men* and *Little Miss* series. He loves that Mr Strong only eats eggs and that Mr Cool is so, well, cool. There is one character, though, that is living up to her name. Little Miss Trouble. The other morning I came downstairs and my son was sitting eating breakfast. He looked up at me with a sly grin on his face. "Hello fatty," he said.

I threatened him with the tickle-bump treatment that Miss Trouble got when she used that name with Mr Bump and Mr Tickle and my boy retracted his remark, only to replace it with, "Hello pudding face" the very next day. Little Miss Trouble was swiftly put into time-out and moved to a high shelf.

All these slender books mean everything to my little boy at the moment. They are helping him negotiate his world and through their narratives he unearths words that give his own feelings and experiences gravity. He often comes over to me clutching a pile of books close to him as if they are familiar old friends, as if they are his very own Black Dog. ●

