

# Home Security

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by Megan Lambert

Last summer my then ten-year-old daughter Natayja turned the corner from reluctant reader to, if not the avid reader her older brother Rory is, *interested* reader—a child who asks for time to read rather than one who has to be prodded to pick up a book.

“May I please stay up just fifteen more minutes to finish this book?” she asked one night, clutching a copy of Jeff Smith’s graphic novel *Bone* to her chest.

To quote one little red hen: “And she did.”

Natayja’s journey to this exciting new stage in her reading life was a circuitous one. She was raised by her biological mother (or “first mother,” as we say in our family) for most of the first six years of her life, and although enough went terribly and tragically wrong to land her and her little brother Stevie in the foster care system when she was a kindergartner and he just two months old, an awful lot must have gone right, too. She has emerged as a resilient, loving, and open-hearted child. I first met her when she was seven, after she had lived in several foster homes, often separated from Stevie. A year later, she and Stevie came home to our family

as pre-adoptive foster placements.

I was already mother to three other children at that point—one biological son and two daughters who’d also come home as pre-adoptive foster placements, but as newborns. As I welcomed Natayja and Stevie into my heart and my home, I was nervous about what it would be like to bond with children who had life history outside of our family. But just as reading aloud to my first three babies helped set the stage for attachment, reading aloud with the older Natayja and Stevie provided first steps toward bonding with them. After all, shared reading with children isn’t just about the oral readings of words, the transmission of story, and the beholding of art; it can also be about creating a common ground for connecting with one another through words, pictures, and shared time and space. I’ve learned about my children as I’ve read with them and seen their minds



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and hearts in action. While getting to know the characters populating the books we've shared, we've also gotten to know one another.

As I began reading with Natayja, it didn't much matter what we read. The simple act of curling up with books was enough, as this child who was leery of hugs and kisses and other moments of physical closeness clamored to sit close enough to see pictures well and to silently read along with me. 'Twas the season when she came home, and so we read just about every Christmas book in the house. We also began to steadily make our way through fairy tales (she didn't know many), nursery rhymes (ditto), and countless picture books.

One story in particular grabbed Natayja's attention: "The Three Little Pigs." We read every version in our

house and then looked for more in the library. David Wiesner's postmodern fractured fairy-tale version *The Three Pigs* was a particular favorite, but she also loved Margot Zemach's more classic fare and Barry Moser's darker version. Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's humor in *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!* tickled her funny bone, and she loved the shifted perspective offered by Trivizas and Oxenbury's *Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*.

Natayja didn't simply enjoy this story by reading it with me and on her own—she also drew pictures of the characters and the houses, acted it out with dolls, blocks, and other toys, and staged mini-performances with her brothers and sisters. One day, during a routine therapy appointment that was part of her transition into our family, Natayja began building three houses out of blocks from a basket in the doctor's office.

"They're the three pigs' houses," she announced.

"She loves that story," I told the therapist.

"Well, that makes sense, doesn't it? It's all about making a safe home."

I sat there, dumbstruck. Here, made plain before my eyes, was the power and potential of story. I sometimes fret about finding good books that explicitly address foster care, adoption, and how love makes a family, and I guess I will always be on the lookout—and grateful—for books that do this well. But here was an example of a child finding a story that spoke to



her both powerfully and subtly.

Rest assured, we didn't make anything more of Natayja's play that day, didn't ask her to talk about the connections between her life of being sent out into the world by her first mother, of moving from one home to the next, of worrying about her brother's safety when they were living apart, and of facing too many wolves at too many doors. We just watched her play, and I think I got to know her a little better that day—as a child who can dig deep into stories, art, play, and make-believe to grapple with the stuff of life.

As I write about this moment in my family's reading life, I am not saying that I hope to see the story of the Three Pigs cast as a bibliotherapeutic

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catch-all for children in foster care. “Read this, Johnny, because you are in foster care, and it will make you feel better.” Ugh. Instead, I relate this story as a way of exploring how children's reading experiences can and do push beyond authorial intent and parental and pedagogical expecta-

tions. Joanna Rudge Long read a listserv posting I'd written about Natayja and “The Three Little Pigs” a while ago, and she referenced it in her March

2009 article in *The Horn Book* on different versions of the story, saying, “One newly adopted eight-year-old's favorite story is ‘The Three Little Pigs,’ which she explored in many editions. Perhaps ‘The Three Little Pigs’ speaks so eloquently to this young veteran of foster care because it's about finding a secure home.”

I think the word *perhaps* is important here. It's entirely possible that Natayja hasn't consciously or even unconsciously drawn the connections between her life and this story that her therapist and I saw plain as day, and I don't want to force them down her throat. I just want to keep encouraging her on her own path toward becoming an avid independent reader while continuing to read stories aloud with her, because I'm convinced that they're a crucial part of the stuff that will help, guide, inspire, and sustain her as she builds her own story. ■



Illustration from *The Three Little Pigs*. © 1980 by Erik Blegvad.