Coming Home to Books

by Megan Lambert

My middle daughter, Emilia, now seven years old, is experiencing some struggles with decoding text as she learns to read, and I find myself facing new questions and challenges as a mother eager to support her progress and address the sources of her difficulties.

I can't draw upon my own life as a reader for answers because I don't remember a time when I couldn't read. Family lore has it that I learned how to read on my own and was tackling the Little House series by age four. I vividly recall receiving the boxed set from my grandmother for my fifth birthday and thrilling at the prospect of having my own copies.

Nor can I look to my mothering of Emilia's older siblings for cues to help me support her reading life. Like me, her older brother Rory followed a fast track to reading independence. One day he couldn't read and the next it was as if a light switch had gone on in his mind and he was plowing through Calvin and Hobbes collections, *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. I missed out on seeing Emilia's older sister Natayja become a reader since she didn't join our family until just before her eighth birthday. In her case, decoding was never a struggle, but a dearth of exposure to books and language early in her life left her comprehension lagging. Addressing this need was a natural means of bonding with Natayja, and I reveled in the nearly visible way she absorbed new stories, words, and experiences

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and integrated them into her life in our family and in school.

Emilia, on the other hand, came home to our family as a newborn through the foster system. After waiting for a placement for several months, I announced her arrival to family and friends in an e-mail, excerpted below:

> Yesterday we received a call from our social worker asking if we could pick up a two-day-old baby girl from a local hospital. We immediately said yes, and an hour later Emilia was in our arms. She is tiny, beautiful, alert, and healthy. We do not yet know if she will be with us forever or just for a short while, but we wanted to let you all know about this momentous event in our lives.

Navigating Emilia's tenuous presence in our family was extremely challenging. "How can you do this?" several well-meaning loved ones asked. "How can you put your heart on the line like this?" I responded with a double negative: "I can't not do this."

Staying in touch with people about her status with our family helped me to sort out my feelings about being called to foster adoption and falling in love with this child while guarding my heart against her likely return to her biological mother, who was a competent young woman raising a son on her own and ambivalent about whether adoption was the right choice for her baby daughter. When Emilia was about a month old, I wrote:

> These two scenarios, adoption into our family or reunification with her birth mother, will take months to play out, and we are fighting against the urge to hope for either outcome because we need to protect our own hearts and because hoping for adoption means hoping for deep loss on the part of another family. There will be joy and pain on either side of this equation, but baby Emilia's need for stability and love is the most crucial factor in either case.
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> In many ways this is the best lesson in living in the moment that I've ever had. We cannot focus our attention on all the *what if*s and *maybe*s because we need to live in the joy and love of our current family life and because Emilia deserves to be celebrated as any new baby does even if her future with us is uncertain—or, perhaps, especially because it is.

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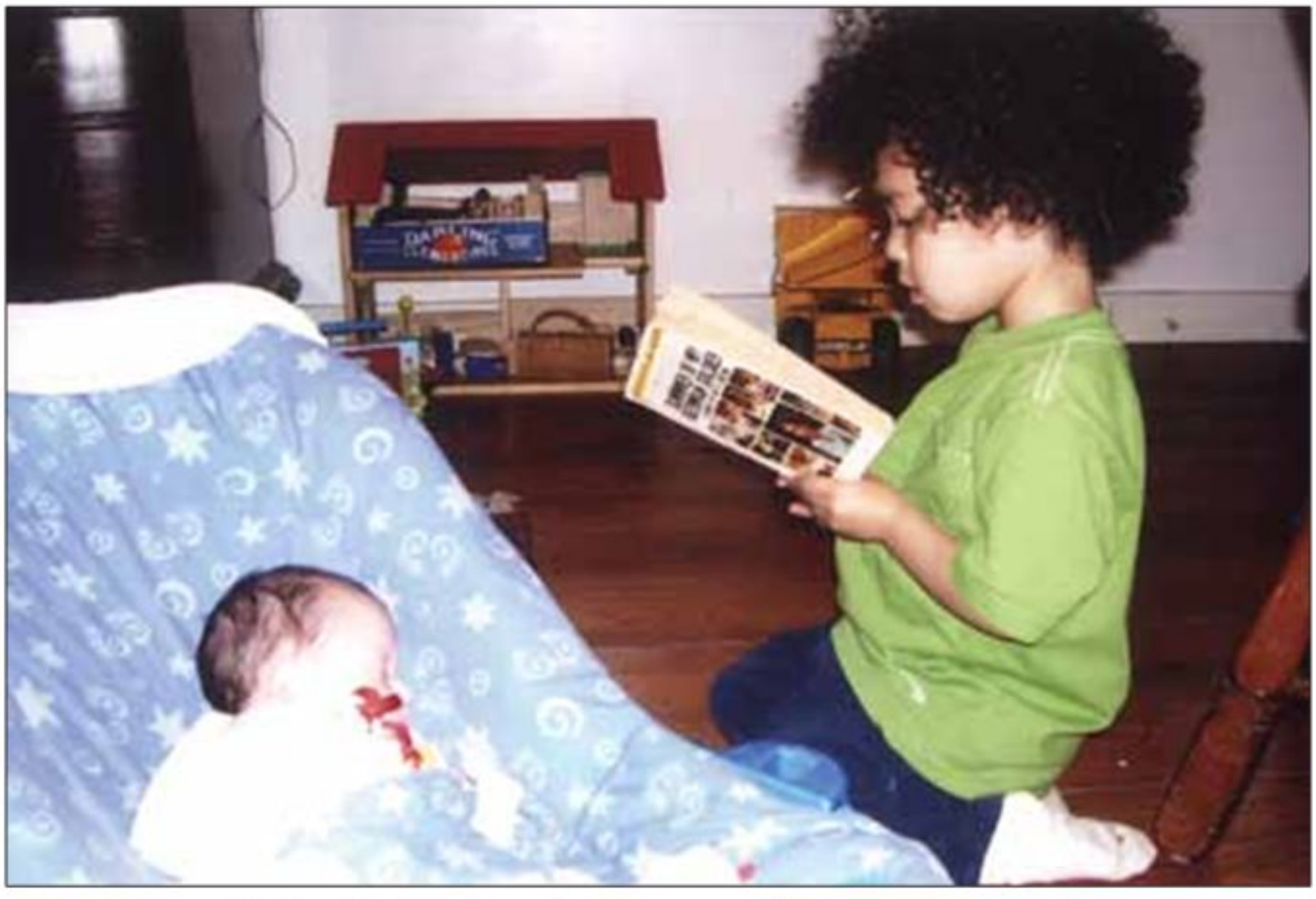
In those early days of Emilia's placement with our family, I threw myself into giving her all I could while she was with us. I devoted a lot of time to reading with her and assembling a collection of children's books that could move with her if she did leave. Because her birth family's first language was Spanish, I stocked up on bilingual and Spanish language books and dusted off my college language skills to read with her.

Those books are still on our shelves because Emilia's birth mother decided to free her for adoption when she was four months old. They serve as a

tangible reminder of those uncertain days when reading with Emilia was not only a natural part of mothering her but a means of trying to leave an indelible mark on her future. Snuggling up with baby Emilia and a book let me forge bonds with her while providing her with the music of language and the beauty of art. After all, don't all the early literacy experts tell us that it's never too early to read with a child? That philosophy took special importance in my early parenting of Emilia because I had to believe that my time with her would mean something to her life, particularly if she ended up leaving our family.

In the years since Emilia's adoption was finalized, I've delighted in watching her grow into a curious, vibrant little girl. "She's a pistol," a new neighbor said of Emilia this year, and that she is. She has a fierce independent streak that I can see manifested in her reading life. As a toddler, Emilia developed a fascination with books without illustrations—"big books," as she called them—and began taking YA novels and chapter books off shelves and lugging them up to her bedroom. She liked to thumb through their un-illustrated, print-rich pages, pretending to read to herself. I got a kick out of seeing S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Judy Blume's *Forever…*, and John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* stacked next to her toddler bed, and one day I peeked in and found her "reading" Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising,* surrounded by an assortment of dolls and stuffed animals.

"This is a funny book, Mom-Mom," she told me, beaming while gripping



Photos on pages 59, 60, and 62 courtesy of Megan Lambert.

Emilia "reading" *Summer of My German Soldier* to newborn Caroline.

the book with its cover image of Herne the Hunter in his stag-horned mask.

Shortly after Emilia began her "big book" reading, baby Caroline joined our family, and new big sister Emilia immediately began "reading" these books aloud to her. It was fascinating to see her making up stories about kitties, teddy bears, mommies, and babies as she held books that were about decidedly different themes and characters. And when eight-year-old Natayja and her biological brother Stevie came home to us when he was twenty-two months old, three-year-old Emilia led regular story times with him and Caroline, holding picture books aloft so that she could read to them from memory or invent text to go along with the pictures.

Despite her lifelong rich exposure to books and language, and the early, evident pleasure she took in shared reading, as a first grader Emilia started to resist reading due to what seemed to be organic issues with decoding text and grasping phonemic understanding. As I tracked her progress and stayed in touch with her teachers, I began seeing possible evidence of dyslexia. Even though she demonstrated powerful comprehension when stories were read aloud to her, loved to tell elaborate stories out loud, and displayed expan-

Emilia's storytime with Caroline and Stevie.

sive vocabulary and complex thinking during dramatic play scenarios, she often confused letters and labored to get through independent reading tasks.

At first, eager to please, she participated in the Reading Recovery program at her school, but the effort seemed to sap the pleasure out of her reading. I tried to mitigate this by encouraging her to look at books on her own without struggling to decode text and by making sure our shelves were stocked with books she felt excited about reading to supplement the lackluster phonics-based titles that she brought home from school. When my friend, illustrator David Hyde Costello, published a new picture book this year, I eagerly showed Emilia an advanced reader's copy of *I Can Help*; she read it from cover to cover, proudly declaring herself to be "the first kid ever to read David's book." Although not a traditional beginning reader book, for Emilia it functioned as one with its controlled, repetitive text and the correspondence between words and pictures.

"Glad I could help," quipped David when I told him about this experience. And he wasn't alone in a long list of authors and illustrators whose engaging work helped immensely in aiding Emilia to be able to read by herself and to *want* to do so. Mo Willems's Elephant and Piggie books emerged as big favorites at home, as did David McPhail's *A Bug, a Bear, and a Boy*, the Henry and Mudge books by Cynthia Rylant and Suçie Stevenson, Minarik and Sendak's Little Bear series, and David Milgrim's books about Otto the robot, among many others.

Thinking back, I can trace Emilia's present challenges to early signs of a disconnect between her processing of visual and verbal information. (After all, if written text is a visual representation of oral speech, then the ability to connect the visual and the verbal is a hallmark of reading fluency.) For example, as a preschooler Emilia was so late in learning her colors that I wondered if she was colorblind. She also seemed to have no interest in matching animals with their sounds, in stark contrast with older brother Rory, who urged me to make up sounds for various and sundry animals once we ran out of the standard barnyard and jungle types.

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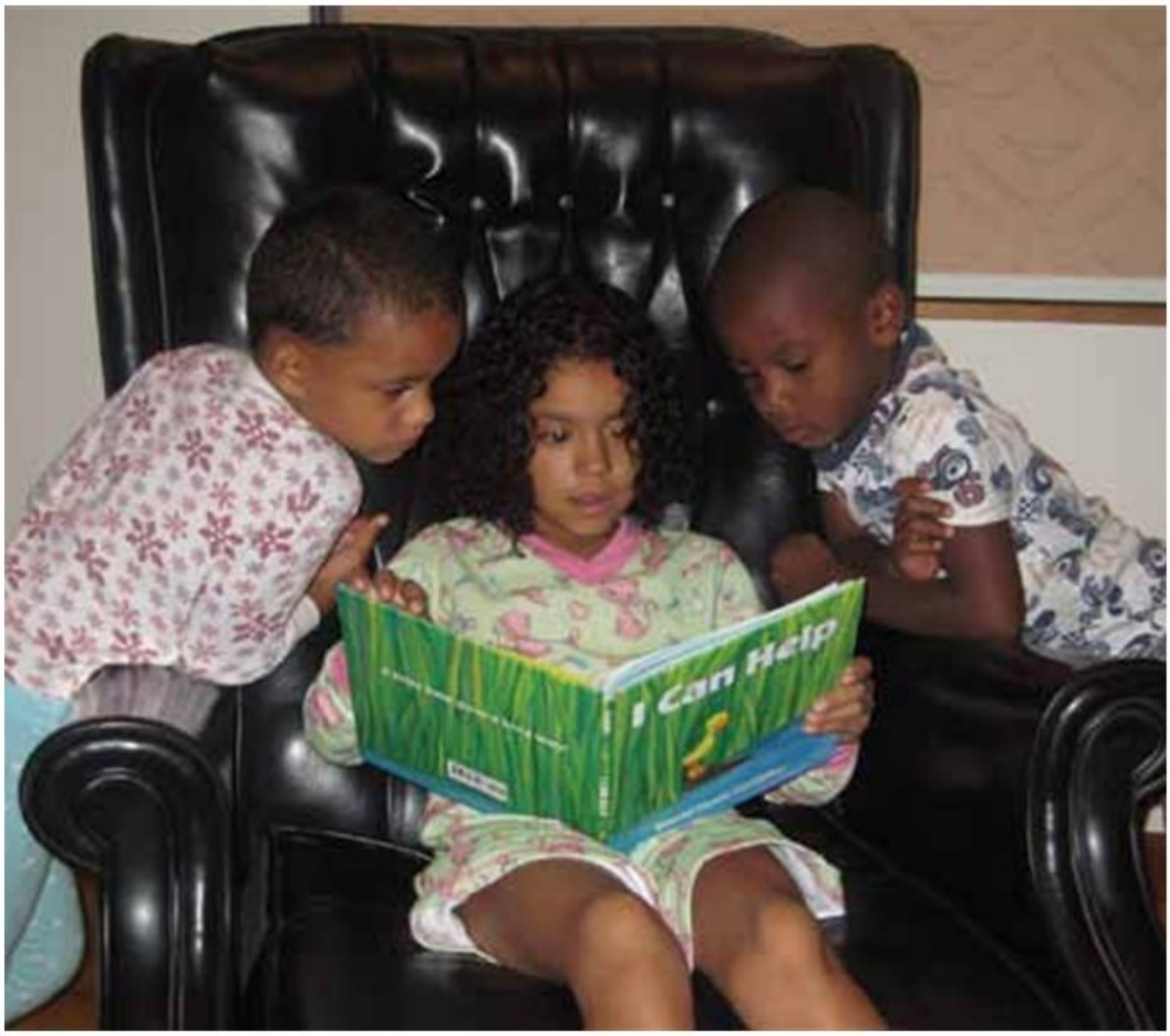
Emilia has also had a consistently difficult time understanding perspective when looking at illustrations. When she was two, I read her *Come Along, Daisy!* by Jane Simmons. She was stumped when duckling Daisy and her Mama got separated and a picture showed Daisy in the foreground of the picture, looking large and lost, and Mama in the background looking small and distant. At least that's how it looked to



Seven-year-old Emilia with four-year-old Caroline and five-year-old Stevie

me. To Emilia the picture presented a somewhat alarming upending of the relative sizes of mamas and babies.

"Mama tiny?" she asked with her own tiny brow all furrowed. She then flipped to the page with the opposite compositional perspective: Mama in the foreground, Daisy in the background. "Mama big," she said contentedly. Though I attempted to explain perspective, Emilia just didn't grasp this element, and her confusion arose again and again in our shared reading.

Despite Emilia's current struggles as an emergent reader and the roots I see for this in her processing of visual and verbal information, I am confident that she will move toward fluency and embrace reading as an important part of her independent life, even as she holds onto the place that shared reading can play in her connections with others. She lives, after all, in a family of ardent readers, surrounded by books that took me and my girlfriend three days to pack as we prepared to move into our new house this year. We read together, and we read alone, though independent reading time can elude me. One day I was stretched out on the couch trying to read when Emilia, then four years old, walked up to me.

"What are you doing, Mom-Mom?" she asked.

"I'm reading."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am. I'm reading this book right here."

Emilia stared at me as I kept my eyes on the page. After a moment she asked,

"Well, then, why aren't your lips going like this?" and she wiggled her lips around as if to silently form words.

And just like that, my annoyance at being interrupted slipped away, proving once again that even though my children can try my patience, they also inspire and reward it. I laughed. "I don't need to move my lips to read words, Emilia. My eyes look at the words and my brain understands them."

"Oh," she said. "That's weird. You usually say words when you read them."

Indeed, although I'm sure Emilia had seen me reading silently to myself before this encounter, her greater familiarity with me as a reader is during read-aloud times with her and her siblings. I established this for her seven years ago when I couldn't have guessed how our story would unfold. Of course, I still can't—even with finalized adoptions, books on the shelves of a new house, and friends, family, and new neighbors wishing us well in this chapter of our lives. But as hokey as it sounds, I try to hold onto the lesson that Emilia's homecoming gave me about living in the moment and trusting in doing what we can in the here-and-now. I want her to know that what she can do now as a reader is enough, and that even though I don't have all the answers and I have much to learn about what it's like to struggle to learn to read, I can help her through this process. I can't *not* do that. ■