

The simple gift of books for children

Justin was almost 11 months old when he experienced his first Christmas. On Christmas morning he unwrapped his presents slowly, mesmerized by the sight, sound and feel of the bows and brightly coloured paper.

But the gifts Justin loved the very most were neither the plastic child-safe toys nor the hand-made pull toy.

They were the boxes his presents were packaged in.

Years later, when I heard the Canadian Toy Testing Council declare the cardboard box as the best toy for children, it made perfect sense to me.

Boxes may look dull and uneventful, but to a child they are toy car garages, bear caves, pirate treasure boxes or bricks for some newfangled Leaning Tower of Pisa.

A box is not just a box.

Books are not just books either. They may look like rows of text and pictures sandwiched between two covers, but to a child they are fodder for new ideas, information, imagination, and a place to understand self and others better.

Of course certain types of books capture children's interest best at different stages of their lives.

The one-year-old who is fascinated by dump trucks will appreciate a sturdy book with brightly coloured trucks and textured wheels she can touch and feel.

A two-year-old will prefer simple board books with seek and find pictures of vehicles.

A four-year-old will gravitate to truck photos with accompanying explanations of how trucks are used in construction.

At Christmas time we think about our children's interests and seek gifts we know will make them smile. Books offer amazing versatility to reflect children's individual interests.

Books can also help children understand and explore ideas and emotions about the holiday season.

'Merry Christmas Little One' by Sandra Magsamen has sturdy lift-the-flaps, with colourful yet simple illustrations and rhyming text. This title in the Snuggle Me series (which includes Sandra Magsamen's best-selling 'Peek-a-Boo, I Love You!') is a perfect holiday board book for infants and toddlers.

Peter Reynolds, author of 'Dot' and 'Ish' has written a holiday story called 'The Smallest Gift of Christmas.'

In this story, Roland awakens on Christmas morning and races downstairs to find an incredibly small gift with his name on the tag. Roland is disappointed and wishes for a bigger gift.

His wish is granted and Roland continues to wish for something bigger until that very big gift takes him away from what he loves and wants the most - his family.

'Bear Stays Up for Christmas' by Karma Wilson is a heartwarming story of friends who wake bear from hibernation to celebrate Christmas with them.

The rhyming and repeated parts of the story make it a great book for reading aloud and inviting your child to chime in with. Iza Trapani, in her trademark style, takes the familiar song 'Jingle Bells' and adds new verses.

This is a book to be read or sung as the main characters fly through the night sky on a Santa-like sleigh visiting children in different countries around the world and discovering their various holiday traditions.

An Aboriginal Carol is a beautiful version of The Huron Carol.

This book, illustrated by First Nations painter Moses Beaver with poetry by Métis author David Bouchard, is written in both English and Inuktitut.

The book includes a CD with the story read in both languages and performed by Inuit singer Susan Aglukark.

A box is not just a box. A book is not just a book. Great gift ideas for your child can be that simple.

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