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When a Book Lover's Son Won't Read

By *DENISE SCHIPANI*

I'm not raising a reader. My 9-year-old, Daniel, reads more or less at grade level, but he doesn't love it. How do I know? Because he says, "I don't love reading." Our nightly book sessions are a chore, and it's getting worse.

And I'm the one who's making it worse — the precise opposite of my intentions.

As soon as I could read, reading was everything. Books opened up the world, but they also allowed me to shut it out if I desired, and I often did. I read through long or short car trips, ignoring my sister (who would get carsick); I sat on the floor of my room reading until my crossed legs fell asleep, ignoring calls from downstairs. I was never bored, ever, which is something I've tried to pass along to my son.

But Daniel is often bored, or he looks bored, anyway, and when he does I can't stop myself from trying to steer him to a book, halting him in his tracks with a chirpy, "Let's read!" I scour library shelves on his behalf, talk up books my friends' kids are reading, read with and to him, try to fan whatever spark I see dimly lit.

I thought I'd been pretty casual, but I'm afraid I'm far too obvious. On one evening I wish I could forget, Daniel wailed, "I like reading, Mom, I swear I do — just not as much as you do." His anguish was real, his outburst free of the defiant, mock-sarcastic, incipient-teenager tone he's been working on lately. To him, my overenthusiastic rants must make his lackadaisical reading habits look unbearably poor by comparison.

He's intuited that, in this one instance, he isn't the child I really, truly wanted.

It's bad enough that he may suspect this. What's worse is that it is, at least in part, true.

Daniel is my firstborn, and like most first children, he got the heavier burden of my hopes and dreams (as well as the newer baby equipment). I dreamed of raising a determined reader, of course, but also an articulate, male version of myself. Too bad the boy I birthed didn't talk, not for a long time (he said "Mama" at 3, after more than a year of speech therapy and much thinly disguised frustration, on both our parts).

All the time he was silent, I was not ashamed of him. I understood, intellectually, that by kindergarten this would be a bad memory. I knew he was bright and healthy. But I wanted to talk to my child, to find out what was going on his head.

I wanted him to be like me.

My outsize frustration in his silent years, and now my palpable worry about his lack of enthusiasm for reading, both point to the same, uncomfortable truth: Although I love this child beyond reason, he's not the child I imagined I would get.

But by definition, imagination is fantasy; it's false, even if (or even because) it comes from the most genuine of places: your own heart. It's only a dream for as long as it takes to create an actual child, and once that real child is in your life, it's his job — or part of it, anyway — to dismantle the dream and become who he's meant to be. And it could be that my child is not meant to be a reader. (Oh, if you only knew how it pained me to even write the words!) Or he could end up catching the bug, which would be wonderful, but not necessarily, well, necessary.

Just today, I returned another virtually untouched volume to the library. He reads “Diary of a Wimpy Kid,” which some parents (I've heard them!) say isn't “really” a book. I disagree! Did I say he reads “Diary”? I mean, he reads snippets from his stack of Jeff Kinney books, night after night, refusing anything new.

Oh, and that night some time back, when Daniel wailed that he didn't love reading “as much as you”? He threw himself face down on the living room couch. I waited a minute, then went to sit next to him.

“Daniel?” I said. “Listen, it's O.K. if you don't want to try that new book. Mommy doesn't care.”

I crossed my fingers. I wanted him to hear it, but I didn't mean it. I don't mean it. I want him to be himself in just about any other aspect than this — I *want* him to be a reader. It *does* matter. But it matters to me.

And he is not me.

Denise Schipani is the mother of two boys and author of [Mean Moms Rule: Why Doing the Hard Stuff Now Creates Good Kids Later](#).