

READY FOR SCHOOL :

Stories that go Beyond Pencils and Lunchboxes

by Gwynne Spencer

Every parent wants kids to have the perfect first day at school, so you find crowds buying Big Chief Tablets and Dixon pencils, three-ring binders that are bigger than the kids carrying them, lunchboxes with the latest TV icons , new shoes and clothes. But the most important preparation isn't bought....it's shared. Telling your child about YOUR first day at school is far more meaningful than anything you can buy. If you can't remember, it is your parental obligation to make something up. In my family, the "legendary" story tells how I got off the schoolbus after the first day and announced that everything was wonderful except that I didn't learn to read and write!

The next best thing to telling kids about *your* school days is to read other people's stories to them. Here are some of my favorite "first school days" books you can find at your library or bookstore.

Bill and Pete by Tomie de Paola (Paperstar, \$5.99) tells the saga of William Everett Crocodile whose name is toooooo long for him to write successfully, so his sidekick (and toothbrush-bird) Pete suggests shortening it to "Bill". Then Bill and Pete ward off the "bad guy" who is lurking around the edges of the story, a

sort of primeval evil bully. It all ends up with momma as proud as she can be and the Bad Guy in jail in Cairo for trying to turn the crocodile kids into suitcases.

School by Emily Arnold McCully (HarperCollins, #4.95) is wordless but filled with details of the eight mouse children heading off to their first day of school.

Ramona the Pest and **Ramona the Brave** by Beverly Cleary (Avon, \$4.50) are chapter books that merit the time and effort to read them aloud. In the first, Ramona gets in trouble for "boinging" Susan's perfect curly hair, gets in trouble for trying to kiss Davy all the time, and gets in trouble for getting stuck in the puddle in her new red boots to the consternation and irritation of the crossing guard. In the second book, she has survived kindergarten and encounters a first grade teacher who really does not like her, but Ramona's spunk pulls her through a scary dog attack and her infamous Pledge of Allegiance episode with one shoe missing.

Spot Goes to School by Eric Hill (Putnam, \$5.99) the educational exploits of Spot the Dog, uses flaps and big print, making it a perfect "I Can Read It By Myself" story for 4's and 5's. It's also available in Spanish, Arabic and video.

Edward Unready for School by Rosemary Wells (Dial, \$7.99) features the only kid not happy and busy in his class who only wants is to be home, alone, given a

reprieve from the relentless cheerful optimism of the other kids and grownups.

Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten by Joseph Slate and Ashley Wolff (Dutton, \$15.99) is a rhyming tale of 26 animals who get ready for school by packing their favorite things while their teacher readies the classroom for them with her favorite things.

What Will Mommy Do When I'm At School? by Dolores Johnson (Aladdin, \$5.99) gives a new perspective on the perpetual problem of first-day jitters by reversing the roles with delicious irony.

Froggy Goes to School by Jonathan London (Viking, \$4.99) starts out with the nightmare of going to school in your underwear, then quickly leaps to the tale of Froggy's great joy in all his fun at school when he really gets there.

I am a real sucker for anything Kevin Henkes writes, and love **Lilly's Plastic Purple Purse** (Morrow, \$15) in which we share Lilly's unspeakable joy about everything in school--the chalk, recess, the kids, the teacher, and her secret--which will touch every reader's heart.

For older kids, I highly recommend these as read-alouds:

Soup and **Soup and Me** by Robert Newton Peck (Dell, \$4.50 each) are set in rural Vermont in the 1930s, with archetypal characters like Miss Kelly, the 100-year-old teacher and Miss Boland, the enormous school nurse with the wind-up Victrola and her dancing lessons for all. The historical slant gives kids the sense that even in "ancient times" there were the same sorts of problems faced today.

Sideways Stories from Wayside School by Louis Sachar (Avon, \$4.50) is a totally nutzoid set of stories about a school that has 30 classrooms piled one on top of the other with no elevator (architectural error), and a mean evil teacher who gets her come-uppance.

The Adventures of Captain Underpants, An Epic Novel by Dav Pilkey (Scholastic, \$3.50) is my all-time favorite read aloud for anyone over the age of seven. It features a dastardly principal countered by determined comic-book readers on a mission of heroic proportion and wild flights of fancy that will reduce every reader to tears of laughter. Unless you're a principal.

Amelia's Notebook by Marissa Moss (Tricycle/Ten Speed, \$14) not only looks like a black-on-white composition book....it IS! It tells the tale of Amelia and her rough transition to a new school, with her own illustrations and mementoes pasted and taped into the book. It's a great idea to pass on to kids who have never had anything worth journaling.

So start reading now, getting those kids ready for school with the most important supplies of all----STORIES!