

## Why I'm Reading *The Jungle Book* With My Kids Rather Than *Harry Potter*

First let me say I have nothing against Harry Potter. I'm fairly certain profaning The Boy Who Lived can lead to being drug from your home and publically decried as a Muggle. I will go on record now as declaring Harry Potter a literary triumph. Skillfully penned and hugely imaginative, it is a series destined to live on in perpetuity.

We good?

My children, ages six and eight, are creeping into the range to become Potter devotees, but I'm confident they will find that path on their own. In fact I'm confident that if I disconnect our cable, homeschool them and then lock them in the basement until they're forty, they will still be exposed to Potter through some sort of communal consciousness.

So when I choose a book for nightly reading I focus on books they won't necessarily come to on their own, like Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Part of this stems from my fondness for old books and part of it is, I'm sure, a reaction to too damn many fairy chapter books.

It is also in large part because I want to endow my children with something that even Harry with all his wizardry can't supply – a vocabulary. But wait! Don't start screaming about J.K. Rowling's abilities as a wordsmith. I fully acknowledge this. She has in fact created her own lexicon. How many times do I need to say Muggle?

So perhaps I should say an extended vocabulary. One that stretches past our own time, not just forward to the fascinating new words coined by authors such as Rowling and Sues (thneeds, sneetches, grinch, wocket – and I’m pretty sure Sues would have gotten around to Muggle if he’d lived a few more years), but back to the forgotten words of those who came before – the giants on whose shoulders we now host story times.

In my childhood I was fascinated when my father rambled off lines from *The Canterbury Tales*. “When that Aprille with his shoures soote/The droghte of March hath perced to the roote...” Part of me was convinced he’d lost his mind. Part of me was right, but I also believed he held the keys to some secret language, a code I could crack and decipher. Unlocking the meaning in these words, not entirely foreign, but not easily accessible, helped make a capable reader out of me.

One would hardly call Chaucer a children’s author and my dad’s bedtime renditions of Edgar Allen Poe stories aren’t going to find a place among the likes of the Berenstain Bears. But these authors did expose me to a language that predates the voices of modern children’s authors. Along with the likes of Kipling they preserve a foregone language that few outside of literary circles and linguistic departments take time to appreciate.

My children are both accelerated readers, but I’d like them to be more than that, I’d like them to be literary. Literary to the extent of being mini-etymologists. I want them to understand that language changes, evolves, and I want them to have a broader exposure to this than ‘Party 2nite. R U going?’

I was the only kid in my AP lit class who always raised her hand when the teacher asked the meaning of an assigned Shakespeare passage. This earned me the scorn of my classmates, but instilled confidence that I was gifted in a way my peers weren't. It also made me feel like a brainy rock star when I explained that, "die in thy lap" from *Much Ado About Nothing* was not the literal form of death, and practically Renaissance pornography.

This is what I want for my children: a gift of knowledge, possibly to the point of conceit. But any parent should acknowledge they secretly wish their kid will stomp the pants off the other kids on the soccer field, be declared a prodigy at their next piano recital, or in my case, that they will humiliate their peers through superior reading comprehension.

So I'll start with this:

"Now this is the Law of the Jungle—as old and as true as the sky;

And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die.

As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk, the law runneth forward and back—

For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack."