



Recently my husband and I visited Rocky Mountain National Park, climbing eleven thousand feet to see the alpine tundra. At first glance it looked like Mars, rocky and barren. But when we looked closely among the rocks, we found tiny flowers and lichen. Biologically adapted to protect themselves from the bitter winds, these low, hardy plants were also protected by the park's signs, which cautioned visitors not to tread on the tundra, since some of these plants would flower only after years of protected growth.

You can glimpse these alpine flowers in your library. They are those remarkable young readers who are enthralled by the drama of stories, the details of a dinosaur's behavior, or the workings of a backhoe. They have a sense of intellectual potency and, like those tundra plants, exhibit incredible perseverance. They tackle books dotted with multisyllabic words and navigate through trellised sentences that climb across many lines of text. Against a backdrop of their classmates' rhythmic "word wall" chants, they read to you in modulated, intense voices about a portkey that transports Harry Potter to a cemetery. Victor Nell has coined the term "ludic" reading, from the Latin *ludo*, "I play," to refer to the absorption, almost hypnotic trance, of such pleasure reading.¹ It is exemplified by the second-grade boy who returns day after day to request another "unfortunate event" or a girl who takes the library's well-thumbed copy of *A Drop of Water* to bed each night.² Over time, the ludic reader, perhaps with minimal help from adults, becomes remarkably successful at choosing the right book and is rarely without one.

Like those alpine flowers, they are well-suited to their task. Clinical studies show that lifelong reading pleasure is based in part on reading skillfulness, described by Nell as the proficiency attained through "prolonged practice . . . a final, integrated performance . . . in which all the component skills summate."³ While their classmates are learning initial sound and symbol correspondence, the strong decoding skills of these alpine readers are transported into the kingdom of Annvin to face the evil King Arawn.⁴ Such skills are a powerful predictor of reading comprehension.⁵

These flexible readers employ adaptive strategies, even for decoding. One second-

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grader opts to reduce her reading efficiency in order to enjoy the melodious sounds of the Welsh names in the *Prydain Chronicles*, but later chooses not to sound out a phonetically complex but contextually unimportant proper name in a science fiction novel. "I just needed to watch for the word's shape to know it again," she confides. Her characteristic alternation of pace for different reasons—"savoring" versus "bolting"—is one of the proficient "reader's reward systems."⁶

If you listen closely, you have probably heard these alpine readers thinking aloud. Some talk their way logically through a comprehension problem. "Maybe you can be one thing to your friends while your mommy calls you another name," reasons a kindergarten boy who is forming a theory about how an alligator can also be named a chicken in Lionni's *An Extraordinary Egg*.⁷ Others marshal practical experience, verbal memory, and spatial abilities to read themselves into life. A first-grade girl reenacts how she can both lead and protect her classmates "just like Swimmy" when they navigate the big kids' playground.⁸ Language-based skill plays a key role in reading comprehension.⁹

Pause again. You can hear them give strategic advice to themselves and to others. "I keep telling myself that, with dinosaurs, there's not always an answer," declares a budding paleontologist. "You have to imagine the wheels turning to know why the gears work," helpfully recommends another young scientist. Metacognitive planning before reading, monitoring comprehension during reading, and selecting strategies (alteration of reading speed, rereading, summarizing, questioning or visualizing) to resolve questions of meaning are characteristic behaviors of these readers. We observe them demonstrating a complex understanding of written language and vocabulary (including the specialized terminology of one or more subjects), and a masterful control of a number of skills that allow them to navigate effectively through various genres.

In today's cold climate of flawed, "scientifically based" practice, these alpine flowers are struggling to survive in an inhospitable landscape. They look at us mystified when presented with incentive programs, needing no external motivations to fuel their inner drive. Having cut

Characteristics of Books for Gifted Readers

Sophisticated beginning-to-read books

Alternative worlds

Playful thinking

Patterns and models

Nuanced language

Multidimensional characters

Visually inventive books

Stories about young children who can read

Problems and plot twists to solve

Understanding how an expert learns a subject

Unusual connections

Abstractions, analogies, metaphors

Quantities of information about a favored topic

Characteristics of Programming for Gifted Readers

Inquiry, authentic research

Individual work with mentors

Use of resources beyond the school community

Pursuit of extended, independent projects of choice

Ability grouping

Critical reading guidance

Guided discussions of genres

Asking and responding to higher-level questions

Self-selected reading

Autonomy in learning

their teeth on dinosaur names and word derivations, they wait—sometimes not so patiently—while we help one of their classmates painstakingly decode a single-syllable word. Weary of their first-grade classroom's decodable texts and leveled readers, they cycle through the library on the way back to class from frequent bathroom trips.

Like signs cautioning visitors against crushing alpine plants, school librarians can protect these special flowers, even nourish their

growth. We can advocate for free voluntary reading and save some portion of our lean budgets to feed non-Standard-based interests in Minoan labyrinths or the Enigma code. As young as they are, these special blossoms have the capacity to exercise a high level of autonomy over their own reading and learning. Let that puzzle-solving kindergartener lug off a copy of *Chasing Vermeer* without interrogation.¹⁰ It's presumptuous to think we can know the right level book that a child should be reading given

the complex interaction of strengths and passions within these readers. As we collaborate with teachers, advocate for groups in which these students can work with intellectual peers who have similar needs, interests, and abilities. Design projects in which they can pursue open-ended, messy investigations, rather than research assignments in which they must dutifully repackage factual information to simplify a teacher's grading task. These young readers are a remarkable gift to our society. In the extreme climate of an alpine tundra, they need all the protection we can give them if they are to continue to flourish. ●

References and Notes

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2. Lemony Snickett, *Unfortunate Events* series (New York: HarperCollins); Walter Walter, *A Drop of Water: A Book of Science and Wonder* (New York: Scholastic, 1997)
3. Nell, *Lost in a Book*, 86.
4. Lloyd Alexander, *The Book of Three* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999) and other books in the *Chronicles of Prydain*.
5. Natalie Rathvon, *Early Reading Assessment: A Practitioner's Handbook* (New York: Guilford Pr., 2004), 15.
6. Nell, 112.
7. Leo Lionni, *An Extraordinary Egg* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994)
8. Leo Lionni, *Frederick and His Friends: Four Favorite Fables* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002)
9. Rathvon, *Early Reading Assessment*, 15.
10. Blue Balliett, *Chasing Vermeer* (New York: Scholastic, 2004).