

Get kids reading for love, says beloved children's authors Lauren Child, Kate DiCamillo.

Two of the world's best loved children's authors say parents and teachers risk stifling children's early reading pleasure by pushing them onto books they dislike or are aimed at building academic success.

Reading should be about escape, relaxation and enjoyment and never cast as a chore, says Lauren Child, author of *Charlie and Lola* and the spoof girl detective series *Ruby Redfort*.

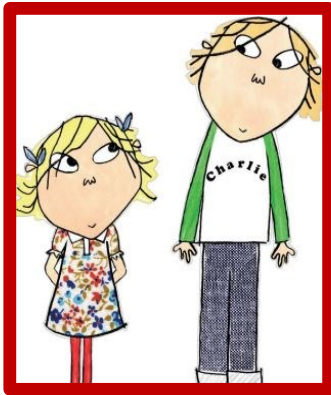


Lauren Child: Children must come to reading out of a sense of pleasure

"I don't know why we are so down on this idea of reading for pleasure," Child says, "I think there is a lot of reading for success, reading for learning. You need to think of it as an enjoyable pleasure. Children also need to escape for emotional understanding of their own feelings."

Young readers, says Child, should be free to browse books that interest them no matter their perceived worthiness.

Crediting her own obsession with comic books for her storytelling powers, Child has only lately come to recognise a note of similarity between and her wide-eyed siblings, *Charlie and Lola*, and the simple pen lines and observational turns of Charles Schultz's comic strip *Peanuts*, of which she was a fan.



Creator of Charlie and Lola, Lauren Child heads to the Sydney Writers' Festival.

"I don't think we need to ram the classics down children's throats and I do think that happens a bit," she says. "They have to love [reading] before they can take on something that feels a lot to take on."

Kate DiCamillo, a former US National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and author of *The Tale of Despereaux*, is wary of schools' testing culture. Both Child and DiCamillo are headlining the Sydney Writers' Festival's Family Day on May 28.

"It's a very powerful emotional thing to read a book and to reduce it to a series of questions in a test strips something away from the book," DiCamillo says. "If you are talking in a group about what a book means to you then that's a different kind of thing."

In *Charlie and Lola* Child captures the child's exaggerated voice and mannerisms of home and the playground. Much of the author's insight comes from a deep recall of her own childhood disappointments, fears and embarrassments growing up the middle child of three girls in rural England.

"Whether it is fear of having fish pie or staying in someone's house or not being able to tell the time, all of those things I can remember very clearly," she says. "We so often forget how big all these things are for very small children because they are so often trying these things for the first time. It's quite a big deal to eat food you've never ever eaten before, you've got no idea what it tastes like."

Writing and illustration she finds "equally hard and equally enjoyable". Like DiCamillo, Child's first publishing deal came after her 30th birthday, having spent five years trying to find a publisher for *Clarice Bean That's Me*, which she wrote and drew between spot-painting for artist Damien Hirst and starting a lampshade company.

Charlie and Lola animation television series ended in 2008 and Child, who was executive producer, was glad of that, worried there was not enough quality material to carry a fourth series. The book series goes on. She has finished her sixth Charlie and Lola book, *A Dog With Nice Ears*, and is planning a "few more".

The secret to a good children's picture book is ultimately one that appeals to the whole family, including the parent reader. "Also not talking down to the children," Child adds. "Children are extremely sophisticated and they understand a lot more than we give them credit for, and I think it is best if they work a little bit to understand a big word or an idea. It's a good thing to stretch them a bit."

Parent to seven-year-old Tuesday, adopted from Mongolia four years ago, Child keeps a huge collection of children's books at home. "If she doesn't like something I put it aside and try it later on. You get a sense of what the child is interested in. There were surprises as well, things I didn't think she'd be interested in that she became very hot on ... things about families that seemed important."

One of her daughter's favourites is *Ernest and Celestine*, about a bear who helps a mouse find its lost toy in the snow. Child had bought it for the beautiful artwork but Tuesday found comfort in the reassuringly cosy subtext of an adult who takes time and patience to search for an item important to the child.

DiCamillo urges teachers and parents take time to read out aloud to their young students, a joy she experienced and thinks instrumental to her writing life.

"It was just a way for everyone to be together and to me it's the most powerful way to experience stories, it makes it communal.

"How do you make your kids read more? It needs to be presented as a joy and a privilege to get to do it, and the kids should get to see you as a parent reading for your own pleasure. It's not something you send your kids off to do, 'go into your room and read for 15 minutes or else'. It becomes a task then."

Tips for making avid child readers:

- Let them loose in a school or council library to browse their own interests.
- Do not judge their selection or restrict their choices. No book can be too babyish or too unsophisticated.
- Model reading yourself.
- Set aside quiet spaces for them to concentrate.
- Read out loud when possible and include all members of the family.
- Don't pressure them to read.