BOOKS

A Family Review of a Fran Balkwill Children’s Book about Germs
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Reviewing children’s science books is riddled with challenges. First of all, it’s not exactly like the fantasy genre where books on vampires or wizards are so ridiculously abundant that you can’t throw a petri dish without hitting one. Good science books for kids take some effort to find. Sometimes we have to go back in publishing time to find something that we think kids will love. Which brings me to my second challenge: I am clearly not the target audience. So I am forced to either a) guess at what might appeal to children of a certain age group, or b) use a statistically insignificant sample audience to evaluate a book (i.e., my kids). And yes, ensuring their participation through cookie bribes is not beneath me.

I recently used my Internal Review Board-unapproved critics to test one of my favorite authors: Fran Balkwill. She has two four-book series entitled Cells and Things and Enjoy Your Cells. They all cover interesting topics, but I chose to focus on one book which deals with the immune system: Germ Zappers. This particular book helps kids learn how their bodies work, explains scientific terminology and demystifies biological processes. It begins by defining different types of cells in the immune system. It has two major sections describing viruses and bacteria: how they enter the body and how the body fights them. Immune deficiency, disease prevention and allergies are also highlighted.

With a certain degree of cautious optimism, I set out on a not-so-carefully controlled study. I presented the book to my critics and asked if they would give me their opinion. I should add that my reviewers have grown up hearing their mother harp on about the dangers of Salmonella in their eggs or methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) in a tissue wound, so they did approach this project with a somewhat educated mind.

Unfortunately, my ten-year-old daughter took one look at the cartoon cover and promptly refused to participate in my study as it was clear to her that the target audience members were “babies.” "Great," I think, "now I’m down to a sample size of one.”

All my hopes rested in my seven-year-old’s little lap and he didn’t let me down. He was riveted by the colorful but clear illustrations (unlike some of the Magic School Bus books which are so busy that he and I both get headaches looking at them). The most important aspect of Dr. Balkwill’s books is that she doesn’t underestimate a child’s capacity for understanding science. I could hear in my son’s comments and responses to my questions that he was really engaged in the material. First-graders like mine might have an easier time reading it with an adult (assuming that other parents are as nerdy as I am and enjoy reading bedtime stories about adaptive immunity). Germ Zappers is best for eight- to ten-year-olds, especially if they are more open-minded to cartoons than my daughter.

In my honest, over-educated adult opinion, Fran Balkwill is one of the most engaging writers explaining biology to children aged six to ten. Her books oversimplify a few things that may frustrate the average immunologist. But oversimplification is difficult if not impossible to avoid for this age group. Too often, science books for kids are written by well-meaning adults who are fairly out of touch with the children of today. It is tricky to make science clear and age-appropriate, while also being accessible and hip enough to appeal to this generation of Wii-obsessed, cyber-savvy kids. But it is my hope that we can join Dr. Balkwill in developing more books for the wonderful, impressionable elementary school age group. I think my kids would agree.

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