

Best Book Ever

Robyn Opie Parnell

Я&R Books Film Music

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For primary school age.

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Я&R Books Film Music

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To William Shakespeare,
for his great wisdom

Best Book Ever

Robyn Opie Parnell

1

Mom blows into my room like a gale-force wind. “Have you done your homework, Samantha?” she asks.

Sam! My name is Sam.

I’m lying on my bed, watching TV. Without looking up, I give her my standard answer, “Yes, Mom.”

It’s the truth. Some time this week I did my homework. If she wants to know about today then she should be more specific. Like, “*Have you done your homework today, Sam?*” And I’d say, “*Not yet.*” Simple. Ask the right question and get the right answer.

My homework is a bunch of dumb reading. I don't understand why schools think reading is so important. I mean, what good is Shakespeare when I'm out swimming and get attacked by a man-eating shark? I could quote lines from his plays, I guess, and bore the shark to death.

Mom turns, about to leave my room when she spots it. For a woman who wears glasses she has the best hawk-eyes in the world.

“Oh, no, what have you done?” she cries and bends over.

I can't help it. I watch in fascination. She has blonde hair and could be quite pretty – for a Mom – if she was normal. But she wears her hair in a messy pile on top of her head with pencils sticking out. Pencils! What's with that? It amazes me the pencils never fall out. They never even wobble.

As usual, the pencils stand to attention like wooden soldiers. Mom lifts one corner of my desk and tugs a book out from under the leg. She holds the novel up and I see a dent in the cover, the

shape of the foot of my desk. The look on her face says it all. I hope she doesn't call the RSPCB – the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Books. I'll be in big trouble!

“My desk is wonky,” I say. “So I fixed it. I couldn't find anything else to use.” Nothing as good as a book, anyway.

She gives me this incredulous look. “You were supposed to read it.”

Like that is going to happen.

I sigh and repeat, “You know I hate reading.”

She clutches her chest like she's having a heart attack, like she's never heard the words before. Maybe she hasn't. I heard somewhere (I definitely didn't read it) that people can block traumatic events from their minds, so Mom has probably erased from her memory every talk we've ever had.

“Did you even look at it?” she asks. “You might have enjoyed it. It's a good book.”

I try to watch TV, but it's hard to concentrate while she's standing there, waiting.

I cross my arms and look up. “Nope. If you ask me there’s no such thing as a good book.”

My words are harsh, I know, especially as Mom writes children’s stories and her first novel is being launched in a few days. But it doesn’t matter. She never listens to me.

“That’s no way to treat a book.” She slumps in the chair in front of my desk.

I don’t get it. She loves books more than anything. She talks about her stories a lot, as if they’re real. Don’t they lock people away for stuff like that? When she gets started, I switch off and think about something more interesting, like how many holes are in a crumpet.

“If you tried I’m sure you’d enjoy reading,” Mom suggests for the billionth time.

When is she going to give up? I can see her saying the same words as she leans over my grave. She’ll probably have my headstone engraved with something like: *Samantha Lavers – if only she’d tried reading*. Of course, I won’t know what it says

because I hate reading (and, oh, yeah, I'll be dead).

I decide to come back and haunt Mom for all the grief she's given me.

She thinks there's something wrong with me because I hate books. When we lived in the city, there were a few scary moments when she shared her fears with my teachers. Luckily, the teachers weren't worried. They reassured her and explained that I'm an average student and that I'm fairly normal despite having a weird family. (Okay, they didn't say the bit about the weird family.) But they did drop the bombshell. They told Mom that not all kids my age like to read. I don't know how she handled that biggie but it seemed to do the trick. She stopped nagging me. I guess she was in shock.

Now, with her book launch so close, the nagging has started again – with full throttle, turbo-charged power.

“Your brother reads,” Mom says, like that makes Mark a hero or something.

It makes him a dweeb.

Mark is fifteen, and he spends so many hours with his nose shoved in a book he can't get into trouble or do anything interesting. He has no life and, unlike other boys his age, he wouldn't know sport if the Olympics fell on his head.

Mark's school report is dotted with As and Bs. Mine usually shows a row of Cs. Not bad, considering...and I usually get a B for Art.

"Your father reads," Mom says.

Yep, my family are all bookworms. Sometimes I wonder if I was swapped at birth. You hear stories about hospitals making mistakes and sending a kid home with the wrong parents. Maybe that happened to me.

There's another big difference, which I point out, "And you all wear glasses."

I don't need glasses and it isn't a coincidence if you ask me. I reckon they've ruined their eyes with all that pointless reading.

Mom's forehead creases. "What are you talking about?"

I explain what is obvious to me, “You all read a lot and you all wear glasses. I don’t read and I don’t wear glasses. I don’t want to ruin my eyes.”

Mom looks at me like I have a monkey hanging out of my nose. “Don’t be ridiculous! That has nothing to do with it. We need glasses because... Well, for all sorts of things. We’d still have to wear them even if we didn’t read.” Her face relaxes in a smile. “You don’t have to worry.”

If only that were true!

Mom hugs the novel to her chest like a baby and rubs its back. I half expect the novel to burp. “I want you to look at my stories,” she says. “Your opinion would really help. After all, they’re about kids your age.”

She’s been bugging me for ages to read her work. But I can’t. I mean, I won’t. It wouldn’t be fair to all those other writers if I broke my golden don’t-read rule for my Mom.

“You could tell me what happens,” I suggest. “And I’ll let you know if I like it. If they make it

into a movie, I'll watch the DVD.”

Mom sighs. “It isn’t the same. A book must be read, imagined, felt, cherished.” She sounds breathless.

No wonder I don’t want to read!

“I wouldn’t know if it was good or bad,” I tell her. “I haven’t finished a book in years.” Ever!

I grin and wonder if there’s a medal for not-reading. I glance at the softball trophy I won last year. Everyone in the team got a trophy. Mine is for *Best Coach’s Helper*. I’m too small to be a champion but that doesn’t stop me from trying because I like sport. Getting away with not reading takes a lot of hard work and dedication – the qualities of a champion.

“Why can’t you just try it for me?” Mom wails. She stares at me, shakes her head and leaves my room. I hear her sniff in the hallway.

Sometimes I wish I could help her and make her happy. Sometimes I wish things could be different.

I shrug, try to forget the conversation, and settle back to watch TV. On the screen, a dog goes berserk at visitors who dare to approach the front door. The dog is small but its bark is huge. The pint-sized mutt carries on as if he could tear you apart like a rag doll. Not to worry, the host will have the pooch sorted out in minutes. He can fix any dog – or owner – no problems, like he’s a magician.

Sometimes I think I should telephone the show and ask for help with Hound. Or Mom. Now that would be an interesting episode.

Hound is our dog. His full name is Huckleberry Hound. He’s a Dachshund and, when we first got him, Huckleberry Hound was Mark’s favorite character. As the oldest, Mark got naming privileges. I got cleaning-up-after-puppy privileges. Hound has been with us for eight years (and thankfully needs a lot less cleaning up after).

Hey! The lights go off, so does the TV. I stare at a blank screen. No pooch, no host, only silence

and darkness. The house creaks. In the dark, I get up and feel my way to the door. What happened?

I stop in the lounge room doorway and my mouth falls open. I stare at my family who sits on the couch, surrounded by candles of different shapes, sizes and colors. I'm surprised they're organized so quickly. The power only went off a minute ago.

My family looks happy as they read by candlelight. It's eerie, like we've gone back in time. I shudder.

“Aren't you going to do something?” I ask.

Mom looks at me and blinks. “About what?”

Like she hasn't noticed anything different! Like the candles appeared by themselves, out of nowhere, and for no reason! I don't think so.

I'm distracted by a *frrtting* sound. I cover my nose with one hand while the other hand searches for a cushion. I find one and shove the cushion over my face.

Lately Hound has been farting. I mean, he's

always farted. Otherwise he would have exploded by now. But lately his farts have become deadly, like chemical weapons.

It's funny to watch his *frrtting* attacks – if you can stand to watch them, if you don't double-up in pain and if your eyes don't water too much. The look on his face is a beauty. His head jerks round and he stares at his backside with this puzzled expression, like he can't understand what his bum's doing or why his bum's doing it.

Poor Hound. Poor us. Poor me.

My nose is shoved so far into the cushion when I breathe I feel like I'm sucking in material and stuffing and... I can smell something. My nostrils twitch.

Oh no! There have been bums on the pillow. Great! I have a choice of sniffing farts or bums.

I try to think of something else. I wonder about the candles. Isn't it dangerous to have flames near Hound's rear end? And books?

Mom says, "You know the vet tried all sorts

of things. We couldn't get an appointment to see the specialist right away. Hopefully, we only have to put up with it for a few more days."

I remove the cushion and sniff.

All clear.

I throw the cushion onto a chair. It bounces off and lands on the floor.

"I know," I say. "I wasn't talking about Hound. I was talking about the power."

"What about it?" Dad asks, without looking up from the pages of his book.

I grit my teeth. They know exactly what I'm talking about. Like hello! It's kind of obvious. But I state it anyway, "The power has gone off."

They look at each other, as if considering my statement.

"No, it hasn't gone off," Dad says. I open my mouth to argue when he calmly drops a bombshell, "I turned it off."

What? Is he mad? "W—why?" I stammer.

"We don't need power," Mom says.

I can think of a lot of reasons why we *do* need power. “But we can’t cook. I can’t watch TV. I can’t play video games.” And that’s only for starters.

Mom waves a hand through the air. “I suppose you’ll have to read a book, like us.”

Oh, I get it. Like a jab with a long needle! This is another one of Mom’s schemes to force me to read. Well, it isn’t going to work. Count on it!

I cross my arms and plonk down in the closest chair. I stare at the wall and wish we had wallpaper. I need something to look at, something to do. I search for marks on the wall and find three. I wonder where they came from – Hound or me, most likely. What else can I do? I don’t want to get up too quickly. I don’t want to look bored. I don’t want to sit here without any power!

I glance around our lounge room.

Our house is pretty small for the four of us, five including Hound. Mom and Dad have talked about renovating. For one thing, we could do with

a second bathroom. My family can't go to the toilet without taking a book with them. Sometimes it can be a real pain if I need to go and one of them has beaten me to it. I can be hanging on for fifteen minutes or half an hour. One time I had to run next door and I only just made it.

Since Mom gave up her job as a childcare worker to stay home and write children's books, there isn't any extra money for renovations. Dad's job as a jeweler only covers the essentials. He sells the stuff. Maybe if he stole it we'd live in a mansion.

It doesn't matter how many bills we have, or how much money we don't have, we always seem to have plenty of books lying around and spilling out of bookcases.

Sure, a lot of them come from the library. And they're essential, if you ask Mom, like food and water. And electricity!

I look at my family sitting on the couch. My brother glances at me and candlelight flashes off

his gold-framed glasses. He looks scary (even scarier than usual) and I get the feeling he could cast a spell on me. I tear my eyes away before he turns me into a bookworm.

I peer at the carpet, then at my sports shoes. I notice grains of dirt stuck in the cracks of the soles. That must mean more dirt has rubbed off onto the carpet. Fascinating! It's much better than reading. It's real-life drama.

I look at my hands and see dirt under my nails. I pick at one of my nails, roll the dirt into tiny balls and toss it onto the carpet. I can't remember the last time I cleaned my nails on purpose. Never, actually. It would be a full time job. I shudder at the thought of some girls' neat, trimmed, polished nails.

Mom stares at me. I'm more interesting than her book. Surprise! Surprise! She frowns. "What are you doing, Samantha?"

Sam!

"Cleaning my nails," I answer.

“Well, stop it,” she says. “I don’t want you dropping nail-dirt on the carpet.”

Jeez, she spoils all my fun!

“How long are we going to sit here like this?”

I ask.

Mom looks at Dad and Mark. “I’m perfectly happy, aren’t you?”

Dad and Mark nod. Typical!

“This is a great book,” Dad says to Mom. “I’ll lend it to you after I finish.”

“I haven’t done my homework,” I blurt out in desperation.

Mom glares at me. “I asked you about your homework earlier and you told me you’d done it.”

I shrug. What can I say? Ask the right question and get the right answer.

“There are plenty of candles,” Dad says. “You can do your homework by candlelight.”

And there’s plenty of electricity buzzing around our house, going to waste.

Mark looks up from his book. “Don’t give her

candles. She'll probably burn the house down."

I scowl at him. "I don't want candles."

"Then you'll have to get up early and do your homework before school," Dad tells me.

"This is crazy," I mutter and jump up from the chair. "Why can't I live in a sane house? Why can't you accept I don't want to read, *ever*?"

Dad waggles a finger at me. "But you must read. How else will you know to stop at a stop sign or what to order in a restaurant?"

At my sides, my hands ball into fists. "I hate books. I'm allowed to. It's not a crime." I can't help it. I look around in case a cop suddenly bursts into the room.

Mom covers her eyes with one hand.

"Your mother is a writer of books!" Dad reminds me, like I could ever forget.

"So. If you was a hitman would I have to love murder?" I demand. I know it's a ridiculous argument but they don't listen to reason.

Mom sniffs and rubs her eyes.

“Your mother writes books. It hurts her when you talk about hating them. How would you feel if we hated those video games you play?”

My eyebrows launch into orbit. “You *do* hate them.” They refuse to buy me video games, something to do with not wanting to encourage me. I have to borrow video games or save up my pocket money, which takes forever. But books! That’s a different story.

Dad’s face brews up a storm. “Go to your bedroom, Samantha.”

S-A-M!

“Fine.” I go to my room. There’s nothing to do in the lounge room, anyway.

I press the on/off button at the front of the TV. It clicks but nothing happens. Over the next hour, I try the button a few more times. Click. Nothing. Click. Nothing.

I stare up at the dark ceiling, unable to sleep.

Against one wall, I have a bookcase stuffed full of fascinating tales (so Mom says). Every so

often, she comes in with a new book, takes out an old one and slots in the replacement. It's like a pet she looks after and I ignore.

I roll over and sigh into my pillow. I can't tell my family the truth. It's too embarrassing. I'm sure they won't understand. How can they? I don't understand it myself.

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