

bits of an autobiography I may not write

Year 7 reading task

Pupil reading booklet

Assessing pupils' progress in English at
Key Stage 3

It was a proud moment. I'd just built my first piece of furniture and I could feel my chest swelling almost as much as the finger I'd hit with the hammer.

"Well," I said to the kids, "what do you think?"

I held my breath as they ran their hands over the four sturdy legs, the finely stitched upholstery and the skilfully hung mirrored door.

"Funny looking bookshelves, Dad," they said. My chest deflated. They were right. Who was I trying to kid? I was a writer, not a handyman.

"Do-it-yourself furniture," I said bitterly. "If there's anyone who can build this stuff themselves I'd like to know their secret."

The kids looked at the empty boxes strewn around the room. "Perhaps," they said gently, "it involves assembling the bookcase, the settee, the coffee table and the bathroom cabinet as four separate items."

"It was the instructions," I said. "They were impossible to understand. Look at that diagram. I broke three screwdrivers trying to follow that."

The kids sighed. "It's the furniture-shop logo," they said.

MORRIS GLEITZMAN
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Text 1

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I realised my problem was that I didn't speak the language of do-it-yourself. I started at language school the following week. The other students were doing French, Spanish and Japanese. I enrolled in Furniture Assembly.

The instructor tried hard, but by the ninth week I still couldn't translate 'slot base support bracket A into side panel rib B'. I couldn't even say it.

"I'm sorry", said the instructor, "I can't do any more for you."

I looked at him pleadingly. "Not even put my bookshelves together?"

He shook his head.

At home I stared gloomily at the bookshelf assembly instructions. Why could I construct a story but not a piece of furniture? Then I noticed the instructions were looking different. They were in the kids' handwriting. 'One fine day,' I read excitedly, 'a base support bracket named A met a side panel rib called B...'

Drop in and see my new bookshelves some time. They look great.

Text 2

Two weeks of thinking, and still no idea for my next book. I'd tried everything. Meditation. Self-hypnosis. Vacuuming my scalp to stimulate my brain.

Then a letter arrived from a kid in Western Australia. 'Your books are pretty good,' she wrote, 'except for the total lack of motorbikes.'

I fell to my knees, partly in gratitude and partly because the vacuum cleaner was still on my head. At last, a story idea. A kid travelling across the Great Sandy Desert on a motorbike. Not bad.

I'd just finished chapter one when the letter came.

'Reasonably OK books,' wrote a kid in Adelaide, 'but why so few exotic fish?'

Good point. I rewrote chapter one. It ended up longer, mostly because the bike couldn't travel so fast with the aquarium on the back.

'Your stories would be more interesting,' said a letter from Bristol, 'if they included more elderly people.'

I had to agree. I rewrote chapter one and it certainly was more interesting. Particularly when one of the kid's grandparents, parched from running to keep up with the bike, drank the aquarium and swallowed a coral trout.

It looked like she was a goner until the letter from Philadelphia arrived. 'More sports,' it said. Which is how, in the next draft, the kid came to have a table-tennis bat handy to whack Gran on the back.

"Shouldn't you be thinking up your own ideas, Dad?" asked the kids.

"Why?" I replied.

"Oh, no reason," they shrugged, handing me six letters.

'Water-skiing,' said one. 'Clydesdale horses,' said another. 'Self-reticulating irrigation systems,' said the other four.

This morning when the postman came I hid under my desk. He found me. I was sobbing.

"Must be tough being a writer," he said, bending down and handing me a bundle of letters. "I wouldn't know where to get the ideas from."

Text 3

The kids stared at the peanut butter, beetroot, sardine and pineapple sandwich.

"Dad," they pleaded, "couldn't you make plain old cheese and tomato?"

I put the sandwich into the lunchbox and explained that I'd decided to make something special for the first day.

"But this isn't our first day," said the kids. "We've been going to school for years."

I added kiwi fruit, two gherkins and some kangaroo salami to the lunch box. "It's my new book's first day," I said, voice trembling. "At the publisher's."

The kids stared at the manuscript. They stared at the woolly scarf tied round it and the knitted hat pulled down snugly over the title page. Then they stared at me. "You're making your new book a packed lunch?" they croaked.

"Please," I said. "It isn't easy, saying goodbye to a manuscript. Sending it off to that scary building. It's almost as upsetting as your first day at school and you remember how upsetting that was."

The kids said they did, particularly the sandwiches.

My eyes misted over. "It's only a ninety-six page kids' book," I sobbed as I filled its plastic drink bottle. "What if it gets bullied by a 600-page truck repair manual?"

The kids took me to one side. "Dad," they said quietly, "remember how you were a bit over-protective when we started school? Getting your helicopter licence and joining the traffic police so you could hover over the playground at lunchtime?"

I pulled myself together. "It's OK," I said. "I'm not going to embarrass my new book like that."

And I meant it. Which is why I got the job as a window cleaner. Far less noticeable and I was still able to keep an eye on my baby from the extension ladder.

That's how I was the first to know about the tragedy. The publishers decided to delay publication of my new manuscript. First they made me write them a sandwich recipe book.

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