

# Summer Reading: A Reflection

SARA S. MUSHEGIAN

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*Sara Mushegian recounts her family's summer reading which gave her a chance to talk with her children about books and, ultimately, about life.*

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**“**You’re going way too far with this!” I looked at my daughter after she said that, pausing for a moment before I responded. She was chuckling, and as she looked away from me and toward her brother, Aram, she rolled her eyes. It was a beautiful Saturday morning in June, a couple of weeks before school was due to close for the summer. Setta, Aram, and their sister, Anoush, had gathered at the patio table with their dad and me for breakfast. As we ate, we talked about the end of school and about upcoming plans for the summer. The children had an enviable variety of activities on their agenda, but the one Dan and I looked forward to most was our family trip to Bermuda. It was intended to be fun and, most of all, relaxing—a time when we would have all the children to ourselves with no agenda other than to enjoy each other’s company.

“What’s everyone taking along to read?” my husband, Dan, asked. We always plan ahead for what we’ll each take to read. We wouldn’t think of traveling without books. Ever since the children first traveled with us, beginning when they were quite young, it was a priority that they have books which would either be read to them or, when they were able, books they would read on their own. No matter what our itinerary, Dan and I endeavor to balance days of touring with days spent lounging with a book; by a pool, a beach, a roaring fire, or whatever the case may be.

Everyone spoke at once, so I suggested we hear from one at a time, beginning first with our younger daughter, Anoush. She explained that she needed to read at least three books before the beginning of school in September. With that in mind, she had already chosen a book called *The Journey Back* by Johanna Reiss (1989), which had been recommended by her teacher. She told us the book was about a young Jewish girl, a little younger than she, who was separated from her family during the Holocaust. Dan and I both enthusiastically approved and told her that we’d like to discuss it with her as she read it or after she had finished it.

Setta, thirteen, and Aram, fifteen, then mentioned that they too had books to read during the summer months. Setta told us she was required to read *The Hessian* by Howard Fast (1997). She said that she didn’t know much about the book but that the author’s grandson was in her English class. As I thought about the author’s name, I remembered why it sounded familiar. Fast is a columnist for our local newspaper

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and had himself been the subject of a recent feature article about historical fiction writers. Setta and I talked briefly about historical fiction and more generally about her current interests in literature. She is a voracious reader, one who gravitates toward mature subjects, as is evidenced by her most recent selection, *Roots* by Alex Haley (1980), which she read for pleasure and thoroughly enjoyed.

My son Aram had just received his summer reading list from Choate Rosemary Hall. He would be attending school there as a sophomore in the fall. It was required that he read *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1998), about which he would need to prepare a paper in September. He had already been to the library to pick up a copy, along with *1984* by George Orwell (1990), which had been suggested as an optional work.

After they finished, my children asked us, "What are you guys planning to take along?" Dan had a long list of books from which he intended to choose. Some of his books were business related, but he also planned to take along *Black Dog of Fate* by a fellow Armenian, Peter Balakian (1998). "What about you Mom?" Anoush asked. Up until that time I had remained silent with indecision, indecision because frankly, I hadn't taken the time to poll my thoughts on the matter. However, after having listened intently as the others spoke, I had a novel idea. Quite matter of factly, as if I had formulated the plan earlier, I announced, "I'm going to read *The Journey Back*, *The Hessian* and *Brave New World*." I'm certain they weren't expecting me to list those titles. There was a noticeable silence as my words filtered into their conscious minds. In a moment Setta blurted out, "You can't be serious. You're going way too far with this!"

Our trip to Bermuda unfolded just as we had planned. It was full of long walks on the beach, board games played after leisurely dinners, and countless hours either collectively seated or in private refuge reading, napping, and again reading. Each person had her or his own special place and time which she or he coveted for such pursuits. Spontaneously, one or more of us would engage in dialogue concerning the various genres, plots, and characters of our books. For that week, we had our own book club, something which materialized on its own. If we had attempted to organize such an activity, it would probably have met with rebellion by the children. No mention was ever made again of my decision to read the children's selections. I quietly proceeded with my plan, reading their books with an even greater zeal than I might have if the effort had been for my own edification. I sensed that the children were observing me to determine whether or not I would truly follow through with my declaration. I think they wondered if I might not find it tedious. In fact, I wondered the same. However, what I felt ultimately, was that I was on a pleasant but serious mission. I wanted to be positioned for dialogue. I wanted to know what they thought, what was significant to them, and most importantly, what was the impact upon their perspective of life as a consequence of having read these books. Not only was I interested

on a personal level, but also I presumed that their teachers would attempt to elicit similar responses. I took some parental license in playing teacher's advocate. As I read, I kept notes of questions and ideas. I did not want to miss the opportunity to transcend my generation and perceive these works as they do. Certainly, had I not read these books we could still converse. But, I would prefer that our dialogue move beyond the superficial and delve deeper to a more meaningful discussion of issues, characters, etc. I'd rather eat a good meal than talk about eating one.

The conversations that ensued were spontaneous, the best kind to have with young people. If they sense their parents are on a mission, children are often less likely to open their hearts and minds. By the end of our week in Bermuda, I hadn't finished all three books, but I had had many spontaneous conversations with each of our children, since I read each of their books a little at a time, devoting parts of my days to each one. In this way, I was prepared to query each of them about something pertinent.

Shortly after our arrival back home, I did complete all three books with great satisfaction. I wouldn't have wanted to miss the conversations I had with Anoush about the desperation the characters in her book felt, or about how the events of the Jewish Holocaust were not unlike the genocide of the Armenians, which had only too recently preceded it. She asked me if I would allow our family to be separated as they were in the book she had just finished. She had difficulty with the reality: that in time of war individuals' rights are lost, trod upon, and mocked. She wondered how she would go on in her life if she were ever separated from her parents. Was this difficult material for her? Absolutely. However, through our discussions about *The Journey Back* (1989) we both confronted some of our feelings about these haunting issues and our fears about what would happen if we were ever thrust into such terrible circumstances.

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No less engaging were my discussions with Aram about *Brave New World* (1998). I asked him how he felt about the character known as Savage. I asked if he felt, in any way, that Savage personified any other historical figure known to him. Initially, he spoke in concrete terms about the importance of Savage to the story line. I suggested he go beyond the written words into the author's use of imagery and symbolism. I asked Aram if Savage could be a Christ figure. I was stunned when he championed that idea and, in order to support it, related a conversation he had had with his grandfather about Christ's struggle and how religion forces us to contemplate and deal with incredibly difficult decisions. He attempted to understand Savage's plight as he had attempted to understand that of Christ. I could never have anticipated such a discussion.

Setta takes great pride in her independent reading, so I decided to give her a chance to witness what transpired between the others and me. Quite frankly, I hoped she would be a little envious of the attention the others received and, simultaneously, inspired by the discussions we had. It wasn't until after school began that we had some spontaneous conversations about *The Hessian* (1997). She was especially discouraged and angered by the misfortune of the drummer boy, one of the book's main characters. She could not see the justice in putting to death a young boy who, by virtue of his association with others in his battalion, was considered an assassin, too. "But mom," she said, "he was only the drummer boy, only sixteen. He never killed anyone, he never even carried a gun." That conversation gave rise to one of many. We discussed other guilt-by-association quandaries that exist in the book, and in her life as well. She questioned how people, especially kids of her generation, are judged by the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, and the friends they have. She doesn't feel it's appropriate to judge others in this way but admits the reality of human nature. She is beginning to understand that one must make a conscious decision to remain non-prejudiced.

During the second week of school, Setta came home one afternoon and announced that she needed help with an assignment. I assumed she needed help with algebra or French.

Last year, I had given her some assistance in those subjects. "Mom," she said, "I have to do a paper on *The Hessian* (1997). Do you think you could sit down with me and go over what we talked about before, you know, about the drummer boy, cause I think I want to do my paper on him." Smiling, I said, "Sure. No problem." I paused for a moment and then looked at her. With an ever so slight, affectionately mocking tone, I asked, "Aren't you going way too far with this?"

We both burst out laughing. ●

## References

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*Sara Mushegian, a graduate of Columbia University (1977), is a full-time mother and a part-time freelance writer. Currently, she pursues graduate studies in psychology.*