

THIS YEAR, PUT A BOOK ON EVERY BED

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Dear Readers: This is a special day for me, because this is the day I take a break from hosting your questions in order to advocate for a cause that is very near and dear to me: literacy. In my long career as a writer and reader, I have volunteered in classrooms, libraries and prisons, reading with others and sharing the work of writers important in my own life. I do so in honor of my late

mother, Jane, who passed along to me her own love of reading and writing — first as a young child on our somewhat isolated dairy farm, and later as adults, when we shared books and letters back and forth, sometimes over great distances. This is a legacy I continue to happily share — through the many books I recommend in this space, and also the two memoirs I have authored. What I learned from my mother’s life-lesson is that when you have a book, you are never alone. Reading unlocks worlds of imagination and creativity. Literacy imparts real power, and this is especially important for people who feel powerless. The magic of literacy can happen at any time, but it is especially important in childhood. Reading helps a young child’s brain develop and mature. Reading for pleasure is a

lifelong gift of entertainment and learning.

Today, in memory of my mother on her birthday, I joyfully share a simple idea that adults can easily adopt in order to give the children in their lives the gift my mother gave to me, by putting a “Book on Every Bed.”

Celebrate the giving season

Here’s what to do: On Christmas morning (or whatever holiday you celebrate), make sure that each child in your household wakes up to a wrapped book at the foot of their bed. The gift could be a new book or an old favorite from your own childhood. If your family celebrates Hanukkah or Kwanzaa, imagine the possibilities for starting each celebratory morning with a story! After the child unwraps the book, the most important aspect of this gift is unveiled, when the parent sits and shares it with the child. The sad fact

is that more than a third of families in the United States do not regularly share books with their young children. Starting a celebration morning by reading together will forge an unforgettable intimacy for both the child and the parent. This year I am partnering with Childrens Reading Connection, an early literacy program founded in my hometown of Ithaca, NY. Their advocacy focuses on the importance of sharing books with babies and children. Even babies too young to talk will tune in, in a deep and abiding way, when they are held and read to. This is an important prescription for health and success in growing brains — and sharing a book is a wonderful way for families to connect. Every year I hear from teachers, librarians, parents and grandparents who tell me they have adopted the “book on

every bed” tradition in their homes. I can think of no nicer way to kick off a busy Christmas morning than by snuggling up with a book before opening other gifts.

Writers give back

One of my favorite and most generous writer friends, the bestselling author Brad Meltzer, not only writes thrillers such as TK for adults, but has published a wonderful “I Am...” series of biographical books for very young readers telling the inspiring stories of people such as Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and George Washington. His latest is, “I Am Sacagawea” (2017, Dial Books). When I reached out to Brad, asking him to share his thoughts on the importance of reading to — and with — children, he replied: “When you read to a child, you unleash real magic in the world: characters come alive, adventure unfolds — but the

part they’ll never forget? That you’re right there with them. It’s the ultimate gift. For both of you.”

Spread and share literacy in your own way

Parents and caregivers can put a book on every bed in their own households; you can also help to spread the cause of literacy by generously sharing this idea in your own community. For families who celebrate through service projects, I suggest adopting a local classroom or day-care center and providing a book for each child to unwrap on Christmas morning.

To learn more, and to watch an “instructional” video of me demonstrating this concept, go to childrensreadingconnection.org — or my own Facebook page: facebook.com/ADickinsonDaily.