

Literary Speaking

The Reading Promise

By Alice Ozma

Reviewed by Michael Sprong
Yankton Community Library

Once upon a time in a land far away, fathers were seen as menacing figures. Children were told: "Just wait till your father gets home" ... to instill fear and intimidation. Perhaps, an antidote to this image is the memoir *The Reading Promise: My Father and the Books We Shared* written by Alice Ozma. It is a story of an "eccentric" father who learned as a single parent to nurture his child through their shared love of reading.

Ozma, in writing about her father Jim Brozina, artfully weaves together both a tribute and her own coming-of-age story. The beauty of her story lies in the way she conveys the tender and sacred moments of growing up. She creates a compelling read by describing mundane family experiences. The backdrop is, of course, reading.

When Alice was nine, her father, on a whim, turned a habit of bedtime reading into a "promise." Jim would read to Alice every night for at least 10 minutes for 100 days in a row. They called it "The Streak." What started as a 100-day challenge continued as a commitment to daily reading. "The Streak" only ended when Alice moved into her college dorm room 3,218 days later. This remarkable habit defined a bond that neither of them wanted to break.

According to Reeve Lindbergh, a reviewer for the Washington Post, "Ozma has written a thoroughly entertaining book with skill, intelligence and a delightful sense of humor. The book is about reading, so it will please librarians and other book lovers, but its greatest strength lies in the author's affection for the father who kept his promise. He emerges from the story, with some poignancy, as a man whose idiosyncrasies are more than matched by his remarkable gift for parenthood. Brozina writes: 'I have discovered very little in life that I am adept at doing. I cannot fix your car, repair your roof, or even drive a nail straight. However, I have given everything I have to being a father, and I happily stand back to see the results.' He should be very happy, indeed."

In fact, reading has recently been shown to produce happy results. For example, data from a recent study by a major university suggests that reading more books can prevent depression in young people. (National Institute of Mental Health, University of Pittsburgh Schools of Health Sciences, April 2011) More specifically, the same researchers found that young people who read more books than their peers are only one-tenth as likely to be depressed.

Once again, anecdote and science meet, and *The Reading Promise* is a perfect example. The value of the book lies not just in a heartwarming tale. It also leaves the reader

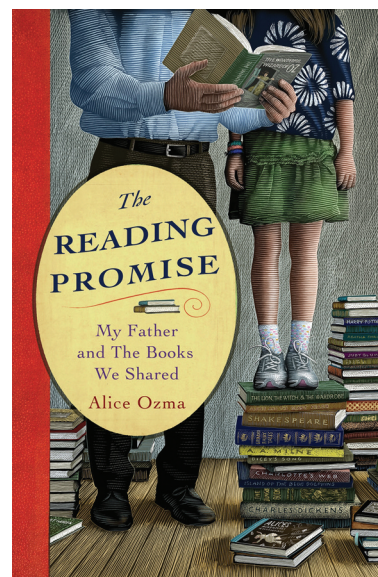
with practical tools to bring reading home. Since Alice and Jim never could have imagined they would read for more than 3,000 consecutive days, they did not keep a record of all books they read.

However, in the back of the book they provide as a resource a list of books they can remember reading along with a form readers can use to make a reading promise of their own.

It is notable that Jim Brozina is a consummate children's librarian who knows how to pick books that not only delight and entertain children, but also help them understand meaning and values that they can apply to their own experiences. No parent can go wrong by following Jim's reading list.

You can use the book's suggestions as a starting point to create your own list. For more ideas about children's literature contact the Yankton Community Library and talk to Becky Pittenger (who, by the way, received the South Dakota Library Association's New Librarian of the Year Award).

Bottom Line: Adults who encourage a lifetime of reading give children a wonderful gift.





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