Reading reverie: A child lost in a book

by Stephanie Paulsell in the July 28, 2009 issue

After a week of chilly, rainy weather, a bright sunny day finally arrived here in New England. Not too hot, not too cool: it was, as Goldilocks found the baby bear's porridge to be, just right.

My daughter, who had spent the cold, wet days reading her way through a pile of books, gulping them down like milkshakes, didn't move an inch.

"Look," I said, "the sun is out! Let's get our bikes!"

"Mom," she said, not even looking up, "I'm *reading*."

I looked out the window at the green world lit up by sunshine and fought the urge to ease the book out of her hands and steer her out the door. Because when I see a child lost in a book, I see someone excavating an interior life, a place in which to cultivate self-knowledge and from which to connect to the world all around. I see someone doing holy work.

I can count on one hand the books my daughter was assigned to read in school last year. She did, however, do quite a bit of Internet research, searching through the haystack of the worldwide Web each night for needles of information about mental illness in soldiers, the rules governing the electoral college, the clothing of ancient Rome.

No doubt our children's skills for locating information on the Internet are increasing. But what about their capacity for absorption, the slow deepening of attention that can happen when we read? What if the peripatetic surfing in search of isolated facts, to say nothing of the constant interruptions of e-mail and text messages, so fragments our children's experience of time that they never learn how to wait as resonances accumulate, slowly, to revelation? What effect will this have on their ability to engage in practices that take time: prayer, friendship, understanding lives that are different from their own, worshiping God?

The magical way in which childhood reading can help children develop inner lives has been illustrated in Joseph O'Neill's novel *Netherland*. Hans, a Dutch business executive living in New York City after 9/11 and separated from his wife and child, has taken a quick trip to a conference in Arizona. Three of his fellow conference-goers talk him into driving with them to a casino in the desert. In his misery, Hans agrees to join them. It is, he reflects, "one of those occasions on which the disunion between one's interior and exterior states reaches almost absolute proportions."

The men pull over for lunch at a barbeque pit. With sandwiches and sodas in hand, they stare out at a landscape of dust and stone, the history of the earth laid bare all around them. Hans is surprised to find himself thinking of Lucky Luke, "the cartoon-strip cowboy who often rode among the buttes and drew a pistol faster than his own shadow."

Hans feels embarrassment over what he considers a banal train of thought in the face of such a profound landscape, but in his meditation on Lucky Luke he finds comfort and more; he finds an inner space waiting for him, a sanctuary. "This train of thought, though of course inconclusive and soon reduced to nothing more than nostalgia for the adventure books of my childhood, offered me sanctuary: for where else, outside of reverie's holy space, was I to find it?"

It is striking to read this contemporary tribute to "reverie's holy space" amid the rising chorus of voices predicting what Maggie Jackson, in her book *Distracted*, calls "the slow death of reverie." Journalists, scholars of child development, cultural critics and others warn that as our capacity for multitasking grows, our capacity for reverie weakens. With multiple technologies competing for our attention, our access to the kind of deep, resonant experience that absorption in reading provides narrows. Reading shapes the brain in ways that can't be duplicated by other technologies. If the practice of slow, absorbed reading erodes, could the neuronal pathways that lead us inward weaken? Could the door to "reverie's holy space" close for good?

Alone with a book, a child cultivates inside herself a place where she can hear her own inner voice, "the sound-print of the self," as cultural critic Sven Birkerts, in *The Gutenberg Elegies*, calls the voice we hear when we read. At the same time, with a book in her hands, a child can travel back and forth across the boundaries between her world and other worlds, her life and the lives of others. The child who reads encounters herself and that which is not herself and forges connections between her life and the life of the world. Holy work indeed.

While I did not encourage my daughter to stop reading on that sunny day, I did urge her to pack up her book, a picnic and a beach chair and head down to the bank of the Charles River. We sat side by side, our books in our laps, lucky to be both alone and together, lucky to be sitting at the intersection of multiple worlds.