

Let your children find their own wings



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 7, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

Ramona has two new main things right now: Halloween costume planning and professional development.

Essentially, she wants the entire family to be zombies this year, her seventh Halloween, and she's practicing her research and penmanship skills because she wants to be a professional writer.

On the first score, we're not to be just regular old zombies, because that would be very boring. Ramona always picks our common family costumes, and they're always multifaceted: Last year we were Crow Witches, and the year before that, we were Princess Superheroes (including 6-foot-5-inch Daddy, who wore my most stretchy skirt over engineer boots with his cape and tiara). So it's to be a punk rock zombie band, unless Ramona changes her mind before the 31st.

Which, it must be acknowledged, is all too possible, as Ramona is nothing if not changeable. The professional writer gig, for instance, is the plan of the last two weeks, on the heels of plans to fight fires, own a restaurant, and be a tree planter (and those were concurrent desires — she planned to do all of them at once).

The reason why I think that the zombie idea might go out the window, or back into the grave, is that I think it's a funky choice for a child who has recently developed a fear of going upstairs alone because there might be ghosts. This has been oddly frustrating for Marshall and me because we've worked ridiculously hard to make her room feel like a safe place. In fact, in the early days when I first moved into the house, that room *was* legitimately scary. It had cracked windows and scarred velvet-flocked wallpaper and lead paint on the floor. Now, it's pale yellow and new-windowed and curtained and carpeted and warm. What's to fear? And why does this particular fear annoy the hell out of me?

I think I'm perturbed because I have so

many genuine fears on Ramona's behalf, and my current students are stoking every last one of them. In my advanced research writing classes, in which students each spend 10 weeks on one meaty paper on the topic of their choosing that I monitor and aid with, I have students writing and researching on the following topics: how bad the effects of the Fukushima nuclear disaster around the world will be (projection — kinda bad); cyberbullying of teens (yet another teen committed suicide this week; Ramona will be a teen in 5 years = panic); air quality in Portland and its impact on children's health (bad, bad, bad); the impact of photo manipulation in media imagery of women on adolescent female self esteem (bad x 7). In short, whew. And she doesn't want to hang out in the pretty room I painted when I was pregnant and dreaming of her because of ghosts?

My biggest fear, always, is that Ramona will turn out unhappy. And this fear flashed across my brain again this week when one of my students in my creative writing class, a talented fiction writer with a lot of great ideas and ambition, asked me the question, "How easy will it be for me to make a living as a novelist?" First, student X, if you're reading this, know that I think you have as good a shot as anyone: I really mean it. You're good — really good. But the answer, and I know this for sure, looking around among my talented friends and thinking of my own experience, the answer is close to truly unlikely. What if Ramona's ambitions are also of the kind that face those odds?

After that conversation, I came home and found on the dining room table a page of Ramona's research notes, which were actually labeled, "resurrrch nots." Apparently, she is writing a short story about monkeys, and her parent-monitored Google session on monkeys led her to record the following:

"All humens are acshuly monkys! Yes! You are a monkey! But you have uposibill

thums. There are a lot of diffrinses with monkys and humens, but over the years, monkys turn into pepol! Can you belev it? We are monkys!"

Aside from noting the dubiousness of certain aspects of the research sources, or Ramona's interpretation of them, anyway, and the fact that she's still quite an eccentric speller (but so was Queen Elizabeth I, and she has a whole historical era named for her), this passage struck me with the same kind of tenderness and terror that I feel when I see a fledgling robin that can't yet fly, but is trying. That brave, bold flapping. That defiant gaze. That sense that so many things could happen to it while it's there on the ground.

We're working on the fear of the haunted upstairs thing: we've cleaned out the closet and explored it with a flashlight, we dutifully check under the bed, and we've brought back the toddler era nightlight. I'm absolutely stoked to find out what kind of story Ramona will write about monkeys turning into people. I'm excited to figure out what a zombie punk band — a cheerful one — looks like.

And I'll continue to assist my students in pursuing the topics that terrify me. I will be a zombie. I will support whatever course Ramona eventually settles on, and I'll let her do the settling herself. It's bound to be an adventure. And I'll forgive myself for being annoyed at the fears that don't make sense to me while I try to protect her.

Something I've learned from years of bird watching: when you see a fledgling alone on the ground, it's really not alone. Look sharp to the nearby branches, and you'll see the parents there, watching, waiting to dive-bomb a cat or pull up a worm from the turf for dinner. They mostly hang back, though, letting the young bird figure it out, and only intervene when they must, so the kid learns how to make it out there when they're not around. It's a delicate balance.

NEW SEASONS
MARKET

Home Grown
shop local
eat fresh

The friendliest store in town.

EASY & FUN TO SHOP • LOCALLY OWNED & OPERATED
www.newseasonsmarket.com

Catch up on what you missed at
news.streetroots.org

Ending homelessness

THE ANNUAL OLIVER LECTURE PROUDLY PRESENTS

Susan Emmons
Executive Director of Northwest Pilot Project and one of our community's leading advocates for preserving and building housing for low-income people.

"Portland's Housing Crisis and How to Solve It"

Sunday, November 17, 3 p.m.
Free & open to the public

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST • PORTLAND
1126 S.W. Park Ave., Portland | www.uccportland.org