

PARENTS TALK BACK

‘Too long; didn’t read’ comes to book club

I am embarrassed about my number. I don’t like what it suggests about me. But I’m willing to confess it publicly, in hopes that I will make better choices moving forward.

Here it is: The details are blurry now, but I’m fairly certain I read fewer than 10 books last year.

This puts me below the average for women, who read 14 books in the previous 12 months, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center study. It also puts me below the average for college-educated people, who read 17. The median number of books read annually by American adults is far lower: about five, meaning half of us are reading fewer than five books in a year. But for someone who grew up a bookworm — consuming at least 50 books a year for most of my youth — this under-10 realization is shameful.

Oddly, I’m reading all the time: blog posts, pithy tweets, essays on my phone while I wait in lines. But it’s byte-sized reading. It’s qualitatively different from the immersive, sustained experience of reading a novel or a long work of nonfiction.

I’m not the only book lover who has strayed.

Nicole Thompson of O’Fallon, Missouri, started a book club about six years ago. When the club started, most people would read the selected book, she said, but that gradually changed.

“Over the years, only a couple of people would read the book,” Thompson said. One month, not one person finished it.

Like her, the other members are time-starved working mothers. So about six months ago, she allowed the group to pick articles or blog posts instead of full-length novels. This option made it easier to get together during the hectic months of November and December.

“We’re not opposed to doing books” in the club, she said. “It’s just that people have less time.”

Parents consistently say they want to raise readers. Trends show that young boys and older teens are reading less today than they did before smartphones and digital distractions monopolized leisure time, and that’s cause for worry. The number of American children who say they love reading books for fun has dropped by nearly 10 percent in the last four years, according to Scholastic’s 2015 Kids and Family Reading Report.

It’s not that young people don’t enjoy reading. It’s that the other stuff they enjoy creates incredibly tough competition. Children have near-constant access to media that’s either more fun or easier to mindlessly, intermittently consume. The percent of children who play games or apps on an electronic device at least five days a week has risen from a third in 2010 to half of respondents in 2014, according to the Scholastic report.

Even as a middle-aged adult, I can relate.

When I look at posts on Medium, the online publishing platform, I glance at the “reading time” metric posted right above the headline. I’ve bookmarked long-form essays that end up in the TL;DR (too long; didn’t read) digital wastebasket. And I have large stacks of unread books next to my bed, on my desk and in our study room. It’s the paradox of this Information Age that I am reading 10 to 12 hours a day and still finishing far fewer books than I did a decade ago.

Would I be happy if my children read as few books as I do currently? Of course not.

I want them to be the voracious book reader I was years ago. I want them to get lost for days in a story, to inhabit richly drawn worlds in their imaginations, to take a journey with a writer and discover new ideas along the way.

There’s a socio-economic and educational link between those who read books frequently and those who don’t. Those with college and graduate degrees, and those in higher income brackets, report reading the greatest number of books per year. But if our attention spans have shortened or our interests have shifted, our love of books won’t translate to future generations.

“We are all capable of reading good books,” Thompson said. She doesn’t think her book club’s evolution to blogs and articles speaks to a change in attention span.

I want to prove her correct by reviving my own book habit.

At this point, it’s not even about setting an example for my children. It’s about reconnecting with a part of myself that I miss.

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AISHA SULTAN
Parents talk back

Mom delays cancer care to protect baby she says saved her

By CAROLYN THOMPSON
Associated press

TONAWANDA, N.Y. — For Kim Vaillancourt, pregnant while staving off aggressive brain cancer, it comes down to this: “The baby saved me. Now it’s my turn to save him.”

Vaillancourt was diagnosed with glioblastoma after going to the hospital for headaches and nausea that came on over Christmas. Were it not for concern for the boy she’s carrying, she and her husband, Phil, said it was a life-saving trip she would not have made.

They believe the unexpected pregnancy was heaven-sent.

Kim had surgery to remove the tumors, but now, to give the baby they’ve named Wyatt Eli the same chance he gave her, she is postponing any follow-up chemotherapy and radiation to avoid threatening her developing child.

“She’s going to do what she can to save the baby’s life and give it the healthiest life possible,” Phil Vaillancourt said.

It had already been an eventful time in the Vaillancourt home in the Buffalo suburb of Tonawanda. The couple and their 11- and 12-year-old children had spent Dec. 23 in Erie County Family Court for an adoption ceremony that made three sisters—ages 6, 7 and 10—the couple had been fostering permanent members of their family.

With five kids on break from school, Kim wouldn’t normally have made a fuss about feeling ill.

“I would have just thought I had a headache and the flu and I would have laid in bed,” the 36-year-old mother said. But since she was about halfway through her pregnancy and worried that being unable to keep food down was keeping the baby from getting the nourishment he needed, she headed to the hospital to be checked.

Soon she would be rushed into surgery to remove two tumors that doctors said could have killed her. One had grown on the front of her brain. The other was dangerously close to her brain stem in the back.

Holding hands on the couch in their suburban Buffalo living



AP Photo/Carolyn Thompson

In this March 11 photo, Kim and Phil Vaillancourt are interviewed at their home in Tonawanda, N.Y. Shortly after learning she was pregnant, Kim was diagnosed with aggressive brain cancer, and was rushed into surgery to remove two tumors that doctors said could have soon killed her. She wears an eye patch now to improve her vision, and a scarf because some of the hair on her head was shaved, but is postponing the chemotherapy and radiation, considered her best defense against the cancer, until after the baby’s birth.

room, Kim and Phil lean on each other as they describe with calm acceptance the abrupt turn their life took between the joyful Dec. 23 adoption and the devastating diagnosis on Dec. 27.

Glioblastoma, they learned, is characterized by fast-growing tumors known to reappear within eight to 12 weeks. With April 25 the target delivery date, Kim has been undergoing MRIs every two weeks to check for any signs of new activity.

“We’re praying a lot and trusting God through these next few weeks to keep these scans clean,” Phil Vaillancourt said.

It’s something the health-conscious Kim, with her focus on vitamins and nutrition, would never have imagined. She laughs while describing her longstanding practice of texting as far away from her body as her arms will allow and says the family’s kept the microwave oven in the garage for the last 10 years, even though there’s no scientific proof that either cellphones or microwaves raise the risk of cancer—and her fears are unfounded.

It’s strange, she said, to now look for healing in chemicals and radiation. Unwilling to risk the baby’s health, the couple plans to begin treatment about two weeks after his birth, hoping all the while the tumors don’t reappear before then.

In the meantime, they will start interviewing nannies to help care for the newborn and the rest of the children, among them 7-year-old Josie, who was born without arms and legs. Phil’s leave from his maintenance job with the town of Tonawanda is coming to an end.

“Just taking one day at a time,” Phil said. “Even looking too far into the future, you just get caught up in what it can look like. Why even do that?”

Though relatively rare, glioblastoma is the most common and aggressive form of brain cancer. It affects about 17,000 adults in the United States every year, but is uncommon during pregnancy, said Dr. Robert Fenstermaker, chair of neurosurgery at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo.

Early in a pregnancy, a woman might be advised to end the

pregnancy in favor of aggressive treatment, he said. Women further along have undergone chemotherapy.

“It’s a tough cancer,” said Fenstermaker, who has developed a vaccine therapy for glioblastoma that is now in clinical trials.

The Vaillancourts have found strength from their big and close families and in the prayers that have flowed in as word of the family’s fight has spread.

“People have wrapped their hearts around this family,” childhood friend Jenna Koch said, describing a GoFundMe campaign and a host of benefits and fundraisers planned over the next few weeks.

With treatment, doctors say patients with the serious grade of glioblastoma afflicting Kim have a median survival rate of about 14 months. But the Vaillancourts are holding onto their Christian faith.

“I hope to fight this off for years and years to come,” Kim said. “I hope to be sitting here in 30 years saying how I beat this.”

Said Phil: “We definitely believe in miracles.”

OUT OF THE VAULT

Mail mixup leads to new name for Pilot Rock Junction

While not quite a ghost town, the little burg of Rieth just outside Pendleton is a shadow of its former self. Established in 1907 as a railroad freight depot at the cutoff to Pilot Rock and points south, the town originally was called Pilot Rock Junction. In April of 1916, the name of the town was changed to Rieth because the mail for Pilot Rock and Pilot Rock Junction kept getting scrambled.

By the time the named was changed, Rieth was a bustling adjunct to Pendleton with a store, hotel, restaurant, school and rooming houses to serve the depot and its employees. Rieth became the main freight depot in Eastern Oregon for trains running between Portland and La Grande to switch out crews (passenger trains changed crews in Pendleton). And the main stockyards in the area were moved to Rieth when Pendleton residents on Thompson Street (modern Southeast Third)



RENEE STRUTHERS
Out of the vault

complained about the smell. In no time there was a housing boom as railroad employees and their families sought to settle there. Portions of town were trucked out of the way when the depot added four new tracks and expanded the stockyards to handle shipping for sheep and cattle ranchers in south Umatilla County. The town even boasted its own baseball team, playing against the likes of Athena, Nolin, Pilot Rock and Adams.

But where did the name come from? In a letter to the *East Oregonian*, J.H. Raley recounted a discussion he had with William Bollons, the superintendent of roads, on a train trip from Portland. Bollons wanted a short name for the junction, “a name that will be easy to handle over

the wires.” Raley told Bollons about the history of the area, and about a pioneer family that had lived at the confluence of Birch Creek and the Umatilla River in the late 1800s, the Rieths. According to Raley’s letter, he also suggested the name Rodeo for the town. Bollons submitted both names to the proper authorities, “and they wisely selected the name Rieth,” Raley said.

The Rieth family consisted of four brothers and two sisters. Two of the brothers, Jacob and Joseph, were part of the famous Bonner party (no, not the Donner Party) that got lost crossing the plains on its trek west. They built a log cabin at the mouth of Birch Creek around 1862, where they were joined by siblings Eugene, Louis, Mary and Julia in the 1870s. The Rieths were cattle and sheep ranchers, and eventually built a large house (called Rieth House) that was very popular with the locals for parties and dances.

They sold their property to the Oregon-Washington Railway & Navigation Company in the early 1900s and scattered throughout the Northwest.

With the rise of autos, trucks and barges, train travel and shipping eventually dwindled and Rieth shrank from a population of 200 in 1922 to 45 in 1940. Rieth’s train yard and depot were moved to Hinkle, near Hermiston. The hotel, store and rooming house shut their doors. The post office was closed in 1971, and the school closed in the 1980s when it became too expensive to maintain for its few students. Now with an official population of zero, Rieth is home to Blue Mountain Lumber Products and a bedroom community for Pendleton.

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ODDS & ENDS

‘Watcher’ house goes back on the market as lawsuit continues

ELIZABETH, N.J. (AP) — A New Jersey home supposedly stalked by an anonymous creepy-letter writer who goes by “The Watcher” is back on the market.

The current owners, a married couple with three children, bought it in June 2014 for nearly \$1.4 million. But they refused to move in due to eerie letters they say they received from a person with a “mentally disturbed fixation” on the home.

The couple took the house off the market last summer after suing the previous owners. But they put the house up for sale again last week.

The six-bedroom, 3½-bathroom home is in Westfield, 25 miles west of New York City. According to an online post, it has high ceilings, fireplaces and “elegant foyers,”

and sits on nearly a half-acre. The listing price \$1.25 million

The current owners, Derek and Maria Broaddus, claim in their suit that they should have been warned about the letter writer. They want the former owners to refund them the purchase price and pay punitive damages.

They claim one of the letters they received read: “Do you need to fill the house with the young blood I requested? Once I know their names I will call to them and draw them too (sic) me.” The person signs the letters as “The Watcher.”

In their suit, they claim they are unable to live in the home “without extreme anxiety and fear for their children’s safety and wellbeing.”

The former owners, John and Andrea Woods, have called the couple’s account fiction and moved earlier this year to have the suit dismissed. But no decision has been made on that request.

Dog comes home with surprise for family: Bag of marijuana

LAUREL, Miss. (AP) — Officials say a family dog in Mississippi recently came home with more than a bone or toy to play fetch — the pup had a big bag of marijuana.

The Jones County Sheriff’s Office says in a statement that narcotics deputies were sent to the home Saturday to investigate the unusual incident.

According to the statement, the homeowner told deputies that when his dog came home with the bag, he initially thought it was garbage. But he inspected it and found that it contained a leafy substance that smelled like marijuana.

Authorities say they recovered about a pound of the drug. How or where the dog got the bag is not known.

Rhode Island tourism video features Reykjavik, Iceland

PROVIDENCE (AP) — Maybe the state should be called Rhode Iceland.

Rhode Island officials yanked a new tourism video, designed to draw visitors to the state, off YouTube in embarrassment on Tuesday after eagle-eyed viewers complained it showed a scene shot in Iceland’s capital, Reykjavik.

The state’s economic development agency, the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation, confirmed the goof and blamed an editing company.

On Twitter, Rhode Island state Rep. Daniel Reilly, a Republican, questioned the cost of the state’s tourism video and its use of stock footage of Reykjavik. He added the hashtag #nicejob.