

PASSING ON OUR FAMILY LEGACY THROUGH BOOKS

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I might no longer be around when my granddaughter is old enough to remember me, so I had a box made for familiar reads, Jamie Swift writes

Coming to grandparenthood late in life, I figured that it would be a good idea to give Nora something to remember me by. She was born last November but who knows? By the time she's old enough to remember me, I might no longer be around. A lasting legacy was clearly in order.

So I asked Tim Soper, a gifted Kingston cabinet maker, to craft something special, something elegant and useful.

Just before Nora's birth, he arrived with a handsome cherrywood box. When raised, the top remains open, no risk to tiny fingers. The box features dozens of delicate finger joints and lots of polished brass fittings. I'd found a fellow who makes trophy plaques and Tim managed to inset the engraved plaque flush to the top of "Nora's Book Box."

I stuffed my granddaughter's gift with books. Board books and crinkly books for babies. Picture books that I recalled both from my childhood and that of Nora's mother, Sonya. Books for junior readers and on to young adult fiction. The scheme worked: by her first birthday, Nora had become fascinated by books. Books were good for chewing and soon she was patient enough to stare at the illustrations while her parents read to her.

I'm hoping that Nora's interest in books lasts. It's apparently part of her genetic inheritance. Her maternal great-great-grandfather maintained a little library focused on the American civil war while her paternal great-great grandfather was active in Montreal's Mechanics Institute, later the Atwater Library. Her great-grandmother became the volunteer president of the Montreal Children's Library. I'm always borrowing library books and have written a few.

By the time Nora gets to be my age, the end of the 21st century will be in sight. I hope she'll maintain the family legacy and our interest in books. Surely she'll have kept her book box. I can't know if she'll have children or grandchildren. Indeed, many are wondering about the planet's future, reconsidering the once-unquestioned idea of having children at all.

If Nora does opt for kids, I hope her box will still be stuffed with books. I can't bring myself to believe the gloomy prophecies about the demise of the printed word. I've seen toddlers consigned by harried parents to hours of solo scrolling on screens, gazing at catchy videos that are sodden with advertising. Surely the future will see parents and grandparents still taking the time for those intimate pageturning sessions? Inviting questions about the stories and pictures. With much laughter and lots of wonder about Enid Blyton's faraway trees and A.A. Milne's Hundred Acre Wood. And, of course, endless mystery and magic.

We can't predict what things will look like by century's end but so many signs are foreboding. Will Nora's world resemble a dystopian, science-fiction apocalypse?

Birds fell from the sky during the latest heat wave in India. This year, floods destroyed four-million acres of crops in Pakistan. The signs are clear here at home as well. British Columbia has been ravaged by fire and flood. Record hurricanes have ripped apart the coasts of Newfoundland and PEI. Rapidly thawing northern permafrost is generating unimaginable carbon dioxide and methane emissions, a terrifying carbon bomb.

I worry that if today's elders – people of a certain age, like me – don't take action on climate breakdown while we still can, future generations will judge harshly us for it.

As elders, we need to question the meaning of retirement. It shouldn't be just about getting out of the labour market. It strikes me as a damned good idea to get involved in urgent work that offers meaning and purpose in treacherous times. There's much to be done.

Last year, I reconciled myself to a new identity. I'm now an elder. I plunged into my first-ever activity in the perhaps presumptuous role of aging sage. I joined an Ontario group called Seniors for Climate Action Now, or SCAN. The outfit has doubled in size since I joined. Volunteering has kept me from too many siestas as I helped compile a list for SCAN of 33 of the Ontario government's "climate crimes." Since then, there have been lots of Zoom meetings. ("You're on mute!")

Meanwhile, Nora and Sonya have moved away to Nova Scotia. For Christmas, I'll soon be heading east with gifts of more books for that box. I just noticed one called *Old Enough to Save the Planet*.

I hope that whenever she takes out a book, her literary treasure chest will differ from Pandora's box; when opened, that ominous container of Greek mythology released strife and despair upon the world. I hope that Nora's box will, by contrast, always harbour something priceless: Hope.

I look forward to sitting with Nora and tucking into *The Lorax*. Dr. Seuss's cleverly ominous eco-parable that tells of the insatiable Once-ler's need for more and more "Thneeds" – read, fossil fuels. The result is the destruction of Barba-loots, HummingFish and the Truffula Trees. The Lorax isn't without hope – Truffula seeds are still around. But the massively popular book concludes with a warning:

"Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing's going to get better. It's not."

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