Choose Your Path books pave the way for real-life lessons

By Deb Mercier

Sometimes life seems out of our control. No checkout people at the till? Your next hour will be spent shuffle-walking through the mile-long line. Need to get out the door early? Too bad. Both dogs threw up and stomped through it, leaving a Family Circus-style vomit trail through the house.

I mean, you could dump all your items in the aisle and leave the store empty-handed. You could ignore the vomit-trail and come home to festering, crusted paw prints on the couch (gross). Those are choices. Not great choices, but choices nonetheless.

If you're a kid tagging along in these situations, you literally have no choice. If your dad chooses to shuffle-walk that line, you're stuck there for the agonizing duration. If you're unlucky enough to be home for the vomit trail, you will have a mop and bucket in your hand before you can say, "that's nasty."

If you think about it, the control factor when you're a kid is pretty low:

"Can I stay up late?"

"No."

"Can I go to Carrie's house and sleep over?"

"Not today."

"Do I have to eat the slimy asparagus?"

"Yes."

"Can I put Cocoa Puffs on my sandwich?"

"No."

Then there's school time, bath time, bed time, piano practice, little league and pottery camp.

There are no choices in those scenarios.

As a kid, when you start on a Choose Your Path book and get to that first page that asks you what you want to do, it's liberating – like someone just opened a window to let the breeze into a room you didn't even realize was stuffy. (Not that other books are stuffy. I am a big fan of children's lit in all its forms.) But there's something special about being in charge of your destiny, really living the story as that main character and deciding the flow of your story.

Of course, not all decisions are created equal. I gave my daughter a copy of *Storm at the Summit* and I remember her accusing voice echoing down the hallway from

her room, “Mom! I died AGAIN!” I think in that case, she had chosen not to pack a rope, or maybe the extra oxygen. Either way, she wasn’t getting off that mountain.

The point is, the decisions you make in a Choose Your Path book can sometimes lead you to an unfortunate end, like falling in a frozen crevasse, or crashing your parents’ golf cart, or being buried in a tunnel beneath a haunted school. And I have to admit, those are (morbidly) some of my favorite scenes to write. Like life, not every decision is a safe one. Unlike life, you can instantly go back and make a different choice.

For me, writing the Choose Your Path format can actually be more difficult than writing a linear book. There are prickly logic puzzles to navigate and the outline (for me) is next to impossible. Add in the next layer of making the story a mystery to solve, complete with suspects, clues, helpful objects which you may or may not have chosen to bring along on your investigation, and you’re in for a doozy of a writing session.

But I love it. All of it. Even the prickly logic puzzles. Especially the prickly logic puzzles. (Okay, not so much the outlines.)

What I love the most is that Choose Your Path books sneak in valuable lessons without even trying to sneak them in. They teach you to evaluate the available information before making a decision. Use deductive reasoning. Go with your instincts on occasion. And above all, know that whatever happens, it was your choice.