



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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***“Not only that, the guy next to me was reading *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler. When’s the last time you saw anybody on an airplane reading anything but John Grisham or Danielle Steele? I tell you, there’s something funny going on.”***

-From Connie Willis’  
“Newsletter,” in the short  
story collection *Miracle  
and Other Christmas  
Stories*

My recent flights to Boston and back brought home the relevance of current newspaper articles about crying children on airplanes. *The New York Times* in particular had not only an article, but also a great letter to the editor, defending parents and suggesting other passengers pitch in and help, rather than complaining.

Both of my flights had sobbing and screaming babies, being tended to by patient and loving parents. In addition, there were children who were quietly enjoying the trip or sleeping. In short, there were lots of children – more than I can ever remember seeing on an airplane. Perhaps it is because I don’t usually fly in June or July, probably one of the most popular times to fly with children. Or maybe more families are flying for their vacations, rather than driving or taking the train. Whatever the reason, I liked having the children around me.

Of course, I am a children’s librarian, so it might seem

natural I should feel that way. But I do. I like their enthusiasm, their interest in the details of flying: watching their own baggage being loaded into the plane, looking out the window at clouds and mountains so far away, or even watching planes land and take off as they wait to board. Given the opportunity, they are fascinated by the world and how everything fits together and I appreciate that.

What I didn’t see on this trip, though, was children reading or being read to. I did see lots of electronic devices, like handheld games and miniature DVD players. Children as young as two were balancing these in their small laps and either watching silently or engaged in using their thumbs to play. I did notice a couple of young teens reading what looked like the latest *Harry Potter* (since I flew on the day it was released) and one adult reading the same. And of course, there were adults reading books, although it seemed

like less than usual and more laptops instead.

I realize that every one of these parents may provide a house full of books, which they read to their children every day, and that these devices are simply being used on the trip as something special. But, just in case, I'd like to put in a plug for books on trips.

I know it is risky for me to mention this, since we librarians are trying so hard to erase the image that we think everything is about books. It isn't and we know that. Modern public libraries are the places children and adults can come to borrow all DVDs, CDs or computer games. We provide computers and Internet access and we are available online. However, we do continue to appreciate the power of books.

It is not simply that they require no batteries. They also engage the imagination, increase vocabulary, entertain,

ask and answer questions, foster empathy, encourage creativity and give parents and children a chance to spend memorable time together. Books provide the perfect avenues for children to become literate, engaged, articulate and well-rounded adults.

Maybe someone should open a children's bookstore at one of these large airports, like Dallas, where I (along with thousands of others, including many, many children) was stuck for 2 days this summer. Now there's an idea - plenty of shiny new exciting books to entice children. It could work.