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# Life Lessons To Be Learned From The Extinct

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### **Abstract**

My five-year-old daughter has brought a coloring book home from her first day of kindergarten. It's called *Dinosaur Fire Safety*. She's wearing one of those plastic red firefighter hats I remember from my own childhood, and she wants to show me what she's learned. We sit side by side on the couch, and I begin to read the first page out loud. "*If your clothes catch fire ...*"

### **Keywords**

child-rearing, fire safety, fire hazard, parenting, burning dinosaurs

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March 2, 2012

## Life Lessons To Be Learned From The Extinct

An Essay by Robin Black

**M**y five-year-old daughter has brought a coloring book home from her first day of kindergarten. It's called *Dinosaur Fire Safety*. She's wearing one of those plastic red firefighter hats I remember from my own childhood, and she wants to show me what she's learned. We sit side by side on the couch, and I begin to read the first page out loud. "*If your clothes catch fire. . .*"

That is the opening text. *Welcome to kindergarten, children . . . If your clothes catch fire. . .* While I have been home all day imagining every danger my daughter may encounter, she has apparently been hearing about them all.

"Look, Mommy."

The illustration shows a dinosaur—a brontosaurus, I believe—and my daughter has colored him orange. There's a birthday cake on the table, and a card that reads *Happy Birthday Max*. And right away I find myself wondering why Max? *Brontosaurus Maximus*. perhaps? Or maybe his parents just liked the name. It's impossible to know.

Max is opening a gift, pulling on the ribbon, grinning with massive, pointy teeth exposed. But unfortunately, in his entirely understandable enthusiasm, he has brushed his sleeve against a candle on the cake and seeing this, I can tell that smile is doomed.

My daughter has colored the cake purple. She hasn't colored the flames shooting down Max's sleeve, but even as mere outlines, they are obviously intense. There are six candles so Max must be turning either five or six. (I don't know if dinosaurs light an extra candle for good luck. It would be pretty ironic if the lucky candle were the one burning through his shirt—the kind of plot twist that leaves you feeling a bit sick.)

My daughter is looking up at me.

“That seems kind of scary,” I say.

“It isn't,” she says. “It's not.”

I'm not going to argue with her, but it is.

I turn the page.

Page Two: *Don't panic!*

“Oh, my,” I say.

The flames have spread to the back of Max's shirt, and my own impression is that, notwithstanding the advice of the text, Max is panicking. My daughter has colored him red. And—not just because I'm her mother—I think that choice, the increased intensity of the hue, is a good artistic move, conveying as it does the heightened danger of his situation. His shirt is blue and the flames themselves, pouring off his back, are an oddly terrifying grassy green. Max's tongue hangs way out of his mouth and a trail of smoke chases him. I take it from the angle at which he's leaning that he's in a big hurry. His eyebrows have been drawn as two lines jumping about an inch above his head. He is, to be clear, the picture of panic. Panic personified. In dinosaur form.

“Do you even know what panic is?” I ask. “Would you know how to not panic?”

She shrugs. “Silly Mommy,” she says, and then, “Turn the page.”

Page Three: *Stop, drop and roll!*

Whoa, this must be some good advice. Because Max here looks like he's doing something he really enjoys. Maybe a little too much. He's curled up on the floor, his three-fingered hands crossed over his chest. He's smiling and—just FYI—I see that with his lips together, only two of his triangle teeth protrude from his mouth.

It's probably not important to the story, but as I look at the picture, I realize that I like knowing Max at this level. I appreciate the care that has been taken with the physical details. I appreciate knowing *what I do not need to know*! It is through just such little details that attachments are formed.

His legs are kind of slung one over the other and his tail seems to be floating just behind him, out of the way. There are no flames in evidence, none at all, just two arrows pointing towards Max's rear end. And I know—because my daughter tells me—that these arrows mean he should roll. They are a form of instruction for Max, for my daughter, for the reader in general. Stop, drop and *roll*.

But to me the instructions are unclear, and they aren't the compelling part. I find myself much more interested in that expression of pure oblivious joy on Max's face. I don't care about the arrows pointing toward his big, happy ass. My daughter has given this picture a kind of once-over scribble, in blue this time, indicating boredom. At five, I probably would have done much the same. I might not have known what I was seeing. I might well have missed the import of that thought-free ecstasy so evident in Max.

“Turn the page, Mommy,” my daughter says. And so, with some reluctance, I do.

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Page Four: *If you have a fire in your house. . .*

Wait a minute. Where's Max? We can't be done with Max. Why are we done with Max? This seems odd. Beyond odd. It's upsetting.

The dinosaur on this page is the kind with those boney fins on his back. Stegosaurus? I don't know. I'm not good with the technical terms. But it isn't Max. And I'm having some trouble here getting into this picture, mostly, I guess because I want to know that Max's birthday wasn't completely ruined by the fire. I want some reassurance that after all the fun he had stopping, dropping and rolling, he still got to open his gift. That his cake wasn't burned to ash. That his parents made it up to him somehow. That they made it all better somehow.

"Wasn't this story about Max?" I ask my daughter. "Where did he go?"

She taps the open page. "Max got burned up."

"I don't think that's what happened."

"Max got burned up," she says.

I try to move on. And admittedly, the new nameless dinosaur has got problems of his own. Real problems I shouldn't ignore. My daughter has switched from crayon to

marker, so the colors are much more compelling. She's chosen to make the armchair—which by the way is entirely engulfed in flames—a deep, dark purple. The dinosaur himself, backing away (as any reasonable person or reasonable *whatever might..* is a loose patchwork of green, blue, orange, pink. And he's holding a book, a book within a book if you will. The *Three Little Pigs*.

My guess is that he was on this armchair, which looks like it was pretty comfy before it caught fire, reading about the pigs, when something terrible happened. Some kind of spontaneous combustion event. Or maybe he was having a cigarette, but got so caught up in the story of the pigs and their failure to take adequate care, he let an ash or two drop, and that was that.

But I realize that I am struggling with this page. I'm having a hard time, not only because I find it difficult to stop worrying about Max but also because I know for a fact that by the time pigs came along dinosaurs were already extinct. There were no books about pigs for dinosaurs to read. And I find myself unable to suspend disbelief here—which isn't like me. Not at all. And maybe because of that, this whole page is suddenly making me feel sad. It's like this dinosaur is in such denial. Like he has absolutely no idea what's coming next.

I'm relieved when without a word my daughter turns the page.

Page Five: *Go outside! Stay outside!*

Okay. So, this new dinosaur, the same finny one (who has jettisoned the pig book, by the way) is walking out of his house, crossing the threshold, clearly moving outward. Outside. Out of his home. And through the doorway we can see that the room he is leaving is full of flames. An absolute conflagration. But—and this is important—the flames are in the background, safely behind him. And, in clear distinction to what might occur in my own home (the significance of which is not lost on me) there's no nonsense here about searching for the fire extinguisher. No picking up the phone to make a call. No backwards glance.

And no rolling around on the floor allowing himself to experience a pure, possibly fatal joy.

*He is outta there.!*

I can't help but wonder if any authorial thought was given to the possibility of having him bring the book with him when he left; whether the responsible parties gave any consideration to discouraging kids from burning books. But I personally think this was

the better way to go. It's so clean. Just get the hell out and let it all burn. Book, chair, house. Burn baby burn. I'm just walk away. No second thoughts. And no regrets.

Looking out for number one: That's the point here. My daughter's magic marker contributions reflect a spirit of liberation on this page. The tulips outside the door sport jaunty stripes, while the dinosaur himself is a kind of happy pink.

"Nice work," I say, and I give one of her little legs a squeeze.

Page Six: *Do you know how to get out?*

The only appropriate response here is *uh-oh*.

Because clearly this dinosaur—yet another new dinosaur, but I am trying to go with the flow—does not know how to get out. And what's more, he knows it. He knows what he does not know. He is that self-aware, that evolved in terms of consciousness. Which I'm guessing a dinosaur wouldn't actually have been. So here's another case of my having to suspend disbelief. But in this case, I'm able to do so. Maybe that's the natural result of immersing myself in the text. Or maybe it's because of the palpable dramatic tension created on this page.

He's struggling with a doorknob, and there's a thought bubble that says, "I must practice!" And I think the exclamation point is important, because without it, it's just like, yeah, he should practice. We should all practice. All of us. More than we do. But with the exclamation point, there's an element of panic here. A sense that he is really not getting this whole doorknob thing. He genuinely cannot escape. It's like, *Holy shit, I really have to practice*. Exclamation point.

I can tell that this page bummed my daughter out, because she has just sort of scratched at it with pencil, not even colored pencil. Regular old number two, graphite gray.

If I were teaching a seventh-grade English class the meaning of the word foreshadow, this wouldn't be a half bad place to start. I'm not saying this dinosaur is having intimations of extinction or anything, but there's just a subtle hint of something like that on this page.

"Do we ever practice?" my daughter asks. "Getting out?"

"We don't," I say. "But we will. From now on we definitely will." Exclamation point.



## Page Seven: *Have a meeting place outside.*

Ok. This is one complex fucking page.

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First of all, there are three dinosaurs on this page. Three dinosaurs, each of which (each of whom?) is drawing a picture. So now we have three characters and three pictures. And just to make the whole thing almost unbelievably self-referential (and arguably over-determined) two of the dinosaurs have speech bubbles, while one only has a thought bubble.

I don't know what else to say. It's like layer on top of layer on top of layer. It's like these post-modern pre-history and it is blowing my mind.

Reading from left to right, the first dinosaur—I think it's a girl because she has a polka-dot bow on her head and even though I would argue that the scene with Max rolling on the floor had a kind of risqué subtext, I do not think this book has transvestite dinosaurs—anyway, she is saying “We meet on Sam's porch” while drawing a picture of a house with the word “Sam's” and an arrow pointing down. I'm guessing that is Sam's porch.

Next to her is a dinosaur of unclear gender who looks, I don't know, kind of ashamed. He/she is covering part of his/her face and his/her eyes are sort of rolling in his/her head. And here's the main thing: he/she isn't talking. He/she is silent. He/she has only a thought bubble. Just that. And the thought bubble says, “I'd better ask my Mom!” When I ask my daughter what she thinks that means, she says that this dinosaur feels bad about not having a place to meet. In case of fire. And I myself read “I'd better ask my Mom” as the words of an excessively anxious dinosaur, maybe a dinosaur whose mother is kind of falling down on the job. I see that shame thing with the face-covering, and I'm starting to wonder if maybe Mom doesn't drink a bit too much. Worth noting

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too is that this dinosaur's drawing paper is blank. Another sign of shame, I think. Pretty clearly.

The guy on the other side of him/her goes to the big tree. I know this because his speech bubble says, "We go to the big tree." And on his piece of paper there is a picture of a pretty good sized tree—presumably the big tree in question. It seems like he and the dinosaur on the far left are talking at the same time, interrupting each other, but I guess they're just excited because they have a meeting place, and they know that they're going to be okay.

It's the one in the middle that I'm worried about. The silent one of unclear gender whose page is blank. The one whose mother has clearly left her unprepared.

"Do we have a meeting place?" my daughter asks.

I shake my head. "Not yet," I say. "But clearly we should. We will."

"I think we're supposed to," she says.

"I think you're right."

Page Eight: *Get a smoke alarm. Make sure it works.*

Oh, for God's sake.

I have never seen anyone smile while a smoke alarm is going off. Even if you're testing it so yeah, technically you're happy the damned thing works, you still don't smile at it, do you? You hurry to shut it the hell off. That is the point of smoke alarms. Of alarms in general, as a matter of fact. The better they are, the worse they are, if you see what I mean. When an alarm goes off, you certainly don't stand around grinning like these two new dinosaurs. (At first I thought the little one was Max, but they have triangular bumps down their spines that he didn't have).

Anyway, the bigger one, the one with wire rimmed glasses and a polka-dot shirt, he's pointing (five fingers, not like Max who had only three) up to this alarm beside which the words "beep, beep" are written. He's showing it to the kid dinosaur. And they are both smiling.

For some reason, my daughter has drawn a thick black line across the kid dinosaur's eyes. I ask her why. Her explanation is that he's blind. I didn't even know she knew the

word. Personally, I was thinking they must both be deaf.

In any case, they are certainly not responding to the smoke alarm in a way that encourages me to think it will do them any good. They are clearly both mentally unhinged, and I'm guessing that will not bode well for them.

I know what my daughter is going to say before she speaks.

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“Do we test our alarms?”

“Of course we do,” I lie.

Page Nine: *If the room is full of smoke. . .*

Oh, if only real life came with words written in the air!

“Smoke can kill!” it says on this page, right in the midst of a great big cloud of smoke. Doesn’t get much clearer than that.

We are back down to one dinosaur here. I think it’s the grown-up from the last page, though he has his glasses off now. But he’s got the same polka-dot shirt and those bumps down his spine. And he is kind of throttling himself. That’s what it looks like to me, anyway. I think the author’s intention was probably to show that he is choking from the smoke, but in fact it looks as though he is choking himself. Which raises a good question. The whole matter of what one would do in this situation. Would it be better, I wonder, to wait there to burn to death, or simply to throttle oneself and call it a day?

And I’m wondering too what happened to his kid. There’s a hell of a lot of smoke on this page. The kid may be hidden by it. Or maybe he got away. Maybe they have a meeting place (the big tree? Sam’s porch?) and the kid is there waiting for his dad. It

doesn't seem likely though. So, what with the child's whereabouts unknown and the adult wringing his own neck, it isn't a very happy scene.

"This is pretty intense," I say. "Pretty serious stuff for kindergarten. In real life . . ."

"He should be crawling on the floor," my daughter says. But until I turn the page I have no idea what she means.

Page Ten: *Crawl on the floor.*

Ah, yes! Words to live by.

Kidding aside, the illustration makes it pretty clear that this dinosaur—the same one from the last page, though my daughter has changed his color scheme from green to blue—has made a good choice by crawling on the floor. He has saved himself. If only himself.

This is made clear to me, the reader, in two different ways. I am, as we say, both shown and told. The showing part is the big smile on his face. A real shit-eating grin. He's a happy camper. Pleased as punch. Everything is going to be fine.

And then, I am also *told* that he's *right* to be so happy by the way the sky above him is shaded with cross-hatching and labeled "smoke," while the air around his head is clear and has written on it, plain as day, the words "good air." Obviously, he has made an excellent choice.

To my delight it's evident that my daughter too has understood this page. Completely ignoring the word "smoke," she has covered the lettering that says "good air" with a veritable rainbow of magic marker dots. And I know what that means. It means that she gets it. She understands. In the event of a fire, she will crawl on the floor. She'll save herself. She'll be okay.

"That's all there is, Mommy. That's what we learned today."

"It looks like you learned some good stuff," I say. "You really did a great job with this book."

But after saying it, I wonder what exactly she has learned.

Because looking at this page, if you didn't know any better, you really would believe it was going to be fine. All of it. The world looks like a pretty safe place for dinosaurs—

as long as they follow a few simple rules. That last dinosaur looks as though he hasn't a care in the world. He must be pretty certain that his kid got out okay. I almost believe it myself. The dinosaurs are going to be just fine.

But there's something else still bothering me. A reason I can't quite relax. "I do wonder what happened to little Max," I say.

My daughter takes the book from my hands and stands. "I told you that already, Mommy. Max got burned." She starts skipping toward the door. "Max is dead, Mommy. Max is dead," she chants, the red plastic hat slipping from side to side on her head. "Max is dead. Max is dead. Max is dead."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

But she's already too far away to hear my voice.

Robin Black's debut collection *IF I LOVED YOU I WOULD TELL YOU THIS* (Random House, 2010) was a finalist for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and will be published in seven countries. At work on her first novel, Robin will be the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Bryn Mawr College, Fall 2012.

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