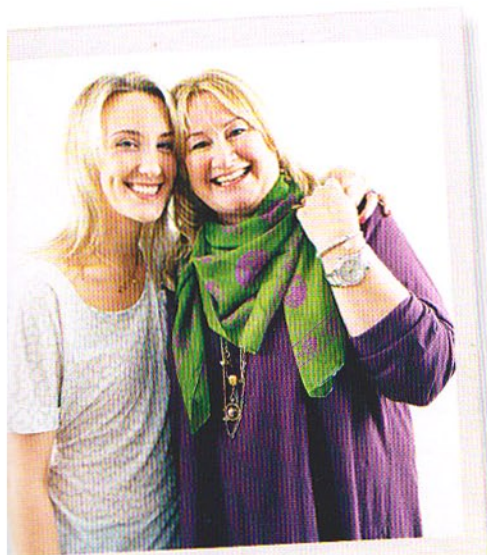


...READING

Grace Timothy and her mother's shared love of books is a release from the stress of everyday life



Grace (left), with her mother, Annie



When I was a child, my mum, Annie, didn't teach me to bake, knit or sew. We didn't crochet or make jewellery out of pasta. We didn't collect berries or stamps, like I saw Peter and Jane do in *Ladybird* picture books at school. She's just not that kind of woman. Thank God.

What we did do as a pair was read.

Proper books, too. I was never taken with cats in hats or cared where the wild things were; Mum went straight to Roald Dahl, Tolkien and Louisa May Alcott. That's not to say I was a precocious or brilliant child – I just buzzed from the excitement she felt for those stories.

When I left home for my first job on a national newspaper, Mum snuck a gift into my suitcase – a book by my new boss, with a note saying: 'Might break the ice?' Once I'd read it, I passed it back for her to read and, with that,

we began our partnership in reading as we sent each other book after book. Reading was no longer a solitary encounter that ended when you turn the final page, it went on in conversation. Devoid of the intellectual competitiveness and forced debate of a book club, we feel as comfortable reading a trashy bestseller as the Booker Prize winner, without a single raised eyebrow. Nothing surpasses the excitement of discovering a new author and finding they have an anthology of work for us to share.

A whole new dialogue opened up between me and Mum. I didn't want to

tell her I was lonely in London, how I was eating toast for every meal, or how I was trying but failing to seduce someone she'd never met. So, instead, we discussed feminism, depression, death, drugs, religion and sex – the messiest of taboos. We didn't just encounter missionary sex, either. We discussed sexual perversion (John Irving's), rape (Alice Sebold's) and homosexuality (David Sedaris'). And, as conversation about books segued into our own personal stories, a new honesty emerged – I learnt about the wild pre-me mother who'd had up to three boyfriends at a time and, in turn, I opened up about my first sexual experiences. We couldn't have talked about these things as they happened, but when the subject is then raised by a fictional character, it's easier to come clean. We had a new take on the usual functions of mother and daughter – I saw Annie the vamp, the trailblazer and the adventurer, and she saw me becoming a friend. One morning she admitted, 'I did something a bit John Irving to Simon Cowell in my dream last night, darling. How did you sleep?'

In the last few years, my mum hasn't enjoyed the best of health so now, more than ever, books are a much-needed source of escape. Talking about books also provides relief from talking about symptoms or having to acknowledge the way our roles are shifting as a result of her illness. I can feed her books to

inspire new strength, books to explain and books to divert.

I can prescribe books to soothe and placate. The truth is, it's all I can do.

I can't equal the gifts she gives me. I can't give her the good health she wishes for, or even the words of wisdom to help

her cope. I can't, I don't expect, give her the sense of protection and security that she gives me. What I can do is give her books, knowing what joy they hold – read alone and together. 🍷

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