

40 Fun Memories of the Cake-Eating Hippo

The Two of Us:

Who 'owns' the cake-eating hippo?

The imaginative reader.

The Hippocampus is part of the brain where memory and imagination live.

Mine is almost full, after 40 years of creating stories, but the cake-eating hippo is the character for whom readers have the greatest affection.

Let me share 40 of those memories:

1. Knock at my front door. Small child. 'Excuse me. Is this the house where the hippo lives on the roof?' Answer: 'Have a look.'
2. Danish Palace note of thanks (with gold crown) from Princess Mary for autographed Hippo book Australian Government sent as official gift of the imagination for the birth of her daughter.
3. 'That was my favourite book when I was a child,' Bearded bikie with tats passing a bookshop autographing, while pre-schoolers listened wide-eyed.
4. Fan letter to: The Hippo, Blackburn South, and delivered to author by the smiling mailman.
5. Rural prep mother who could not read, but wanted 'Another easy book like Hippo which I'm learning to read with my 5 year old.' Brave woman in front of other parents.
6. In Montessori School, in Kathmandu, reading via interpreter, with Himalayan mountains as a backdrop.
7. Fantasy crosses cultures. Youfu West St. International School, Nanjing. Grade 4 teacher Shi Jing memorised "Look, There's A Hippopotamus In The Playground Eating Cake". Scanned (pictures and English text), timed to match her retelling with props.
8. Principal, an ex rugby player, challenged to eat cake on school roof, in hippo costume, and read the book aloud if his students surpassed their reading quotas. They did. And despite being scared of heights, he kept his promise.
9. Most 'nicked' library book. Compliment?
10. Hippopotamuseum created by gifted educator to demonstrate physics principles e.g. falling.
11. Shepparton Regional Mobile Library van with hippo character painted outside and the books inside.
12. 'My Mum went to Weight Watchers, I think you should go too. '(fan e-mail to Hippo).
13. Buying a 2 seater Toyota Echo car, I asked, 'Will my hippo fit on the front passenger seat?' Answer: 'Of course Madam'.
14. Police breathaliser squad, 'Drive on Ma'am', after recognising my hippo passenger strapped in front seat.

15. Giant Book touring Northern Territory in a truck, and shown at libraries to encourage literacy. Within the book cover, a hole for child's head, so children became part of the book and were photographed as literacy incentive.
16. Parent's letter from children's hospital, thanking for the reassurance of 'Hippo on the Hospital Roof' read in waiting room and in ambulance en route.
17. In Paris, at Australian Bookshop, talking with ex-pat families. Then reading at the American School with 25 nationalities in the room.
18. 'Hip Hip Hippo' on stage with 'Skylark Theatre' puppets and child from audience talking to the hippo puppet on roller-skates in the aisle, as if it were real.
19. Vision Australia's Felix suitcase of book and stimulus for blind pre-schoolers. Also had hippo cake tins, an audio and Braille copy. Helped name Felix project. Felix means happy and 'feel' related to the textures felt by blind children.
20. Auslan signed video for deaf students: I can now 'sign' 'I love Hippo'.
21. Beset in Antarctic polar ice, expeditioners wanted books signed for their kids.
22. In Box Hill Hospital with 'Streptococcus Agalactica' ,night nurses fans brought books to sign before I went to the ward.
23. Collage of memorable fan letters touring as 'Corridors of Characters' with Hippo responses by ghost-writer Hazel, exhibited at former Fremantle Maximum Security Jail.
24. 'Hippo' PJs. Worn in Parade accompanying Dromkeen Literature Homestead float of children's ten favourite book characters.
25. C.V. of a rooftop hippo requested, despite him being speechless, so author had to ghost-write previous jobs like roof climbing and cake testing.
26. Requested set of autographed hippo books as wedding gift.
27. Fan mail peaks around Book Week. 'I haven't got a friend, will you come and sit on my roof?' was the most poignant.
28. 'Us mob like your stories. We laugh at the funny bits.' Webchat with Katherine outback school.
29. 'Does the Hippo talk to Plato?' Can an imaginary creature from one book talk to another? 'Yes, in my head.' What about a cast party? Meet or eat?
30. FaceBook thanks from mother of 13 year old who'd had severe health challenges and who 'wore out' several hippo books by daily readings and these had been replaced regularly by the family.
31. Smack' support when furore about whether the word 'smack' should be replaced in the new Penguin edition, with 'Daddy growled'.
32. Discovering that hippo can travel free as a 'tool of trade' in plane hold, rather than as excess baggage.
33. Bookstore provided candles on hippo cake. Blown out, just before smoke detector above, shrieked.
34. After literary festivals, the over-loved hippo needed cleaning. Too big to fit in washing machines, hippo had to be 'emptied' of polystyrene balls and the 'skin' hand-washed in baby soap flakes. Experts advised removing the filling in the carpark or in the bath. ...I found out why. The polystyrene balls went everywhere, even clung to our underwear. I hand-washed 'skinny' hippo in our bath and a visitor freaked on opening the shower door to discover hippo hanging, to dry.
35. Ladder-Climbing Competency? Education rules forbid staff to climb above their own height without a ladder climbing competency certificate. We forged one for hippo so the local newspaper could capture the hippo climbing the ladder onto the mobile library roof.

36. Fantasy logic dilemma. Uni-sex Baby in earlier books, now older and needed a pronoun. Readers wanted to name Hippo too. ‘Amus’ meaning friend was the suggested name, taken from hippopotamus.
37. Question Mark candles. For the age-less hippo .
38. Zoo launch. Guests invited to BYOHF (Bring Your Own Hippo Food) e.g. hippo dandruff white marshmallows & Hippo blood red wine for adults.
39. ‘I know where Hippo lives, ‘Half past Grandma.’ Probably because Grandma is a location and time is measured in half hours.

So.... How old is the hippo?

The age of the reader.

Extract adapted from Hazel Edwards’ quirky memoir ‘Not Just a Piece of Cake; Being an Author’ (Brolga) which shares the workstyle of a long term author who takes risks. <https://hazeledwards.com/not-just-a-piece-of-cake-being-an-author.html>

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Hippo History!

First published in 1980, the original ‘There’s a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake’ was conceived in 1978 after our new roof leaked. Without original publisher Margaret Hamilton, none of this 40 year legacy would have happened.

Deborah Niland's illustrations are now part of many children's imaginative history. The simplicity and reassurance of a big, colourful imaginary friend with all the answers, seems to reassure, especially children with special challenges.

The value for families in reading ‘fantasy’ is the encouragement of imaginative problem-solving and where it is ok to have ‘fun’ and to ‘risk’ trying a different way to solve a challenge. Quirky things happen to authors, or maybe they just note them. Apart from relieving boredom, it enriches life to have a sense of humour, which memorises the absurd, or juxta-poses unexpected combinations.

Hazel Edwards OAM www.hazeledwards.com