

It's amazing what a child can do with a little imagination and a large cardboard box. Add some sheets and pillows to the mix, and a plain brown cardboard transforms into the blinking, beeping control panel of a spaceship, the dark belly of a whale, or the stony walls of a dank dungeon. For a young child, the blank canvas of a cardboard box presents nearly endless possibilities.

Don Winn, founder of children's book publishing company Cardboard Box Adventures, remembers well the wonder he experienced as a young boy when presented with a cardboard box. "For a kid, the box is often more fun than what's inside," says Don, who recalls spending hours playing with large cardboard boxes, letting his imagination take him to new galaxies.

These fond memories of child-

hood are what prompted Don to name his company Cardboard Box Adventures. "With a little imagination, you can do anything," Don says. "Be anyone. Go anywhere."

As the name suggests, Don created his publishing company and each of the books published under its name with a special purpose: to engage kids in discussion while prompting them to think constructively and creatively. "All of the stories rhyme, they all have a lesson, and they all have questions at the end," Don says. "It gives parents a vehicle through which they can begin to talk to their children about important issues, learn from their children, teach their children through the stories' teachable moments, and begin engaging their children in conversation."

For example, if a child is having trouble following rules, a parent and child might read together

Don's newest picture book, "Twitch the Squirrel and the Forbidden Bridge." At the end of the book, the story presents a series of critical-thinking questions such as "Do your parents make rules that you don't understand?" and "What kind of squirrel is Twitch?" for children to discuss with their parents.

"It's fun reading to a child," says Don, who uses his grandnieces as sounding boards for his works in progress, "but when you listen to them, that's where the magic happens."

Since each question is written with the intent of sparking children and parents to interact on a deeper level, parents who utilize the question and answer section often gain deeper insight into the challenges their children currently face.

According to Don, parents often assume their children understand the books they read together. ►

BY
RACHEL
BROWNLOW

**PHOTOS
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DON WINN**

For more information, visit
<http://www.donwinn.com/>.

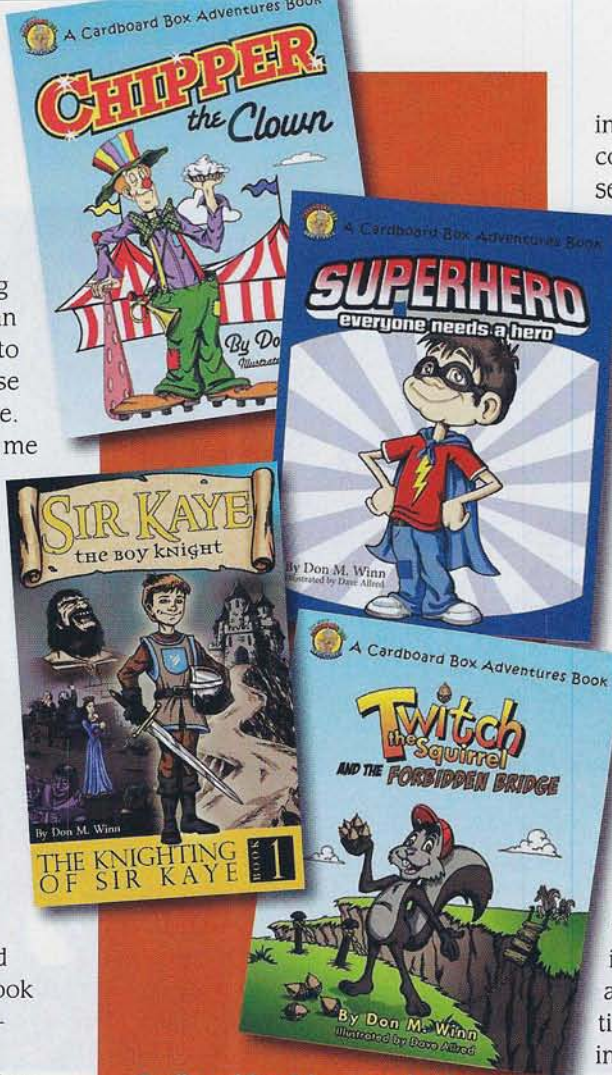
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But when parents take the time to ask their children questions and actively listen to their answers, many parents find themselves bonding with their kids and learning more about their lives. The same can be said of the children in reference to their parents—many find the exercise to be a powerful bonding experience.

"I remember a parent came up to me one time to tell me that his favorite part of the book was the questions because it allowed him the opportunity to bond with his kid. He said one time he tried to end the book without asking the questions, and his daughter stopped him: 'But Dad, you haven't asked the questions yet!'" Don chuckles.

"It's such a simple thing, but people find it brilliant. Really, it's what people used to do," Don says, before interactive children's toys and children's television programs became a more popular pastime.

In fact, the idea for a question and answer section at the back of the book was modeled after Don's fond childhood memories of reading the children's dictionary with his grandmother. "We'd open up the book, look at pictures, and read the entries," Don says. "Then she'd ask me questions about what we'd read. We had the greatest conversations... At the time, I didn't realize I was learning. To me, it was just fun."



Cardboard Box Adventures books can be found in hardbound, softbound, and eBook format and can be purchased from most online retailers, including Amazon and Barnes & Noble. You can also find them locally at Georgetown's All Things Kids, Book Spot in Round Rock, and Center for Better Health in Austin.

Other topics covered in Don's stories include bullying, peer pressure, overcoming learning difficulties, being one's self, and paying attention in class. To date, Don has written nine picture books geared toward four- to eight-year-olds and one chapter book, with five more chapter books—geared for grades three and up—planned for later release.

Don's formula of bringing together fun, rhyming text, and engaging characters with life lessons and a question and answer section has been met overwhelmingly with glowing approval. Since he started Cardboard Box Adventures in 2009, Don has been asked to participate in radio interviews, has spoken to schools and classrooms of young students, and has been featured in a variety of magazines and articles.

According to Don, most of his ideas for stories come either from life experiences or from observing nature and how animals interact. "Sometimes the storyline comes to me immediately; and sometimes it takes a while to flesh out," he says. Don estimates that if everything goes according to schedule and if the collaboration with his illustrator, Dave Allred, goes smoothly, it takes a minimum of six months to develop his story idea from conception to publication.

And once children get a Cardboard Box book in hand, they have hours of fun ahead—and those hours lead to memories that will last a lifetime. ■

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