

Baird: Sometimes, a box is more than a box

By Esther C. Baird/ The Baird Facts
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Both my daughter and I are going 'back to school' this week.

More accurately, I am going 'back' to chip away at my Masters and she is simply 'going' since it will be her first foray into preschool. We both will be going to school two mornings a week and we both hope we like our teachers. But the similarities end there because whereas I have to show up with textbooks that cost a ridiculous fortune, she has to show up with two extra outfits in case she spills paint, or jumps in a puddle, or perhaps has a little accident. And while I'll be left to forage in the student lounge if I want to eat, she is required to show up with a packed lunch - in a new lunchbox.

When I was growing up the lunchbox was a very important part of my school ensemble. It communicated in one simple container who I was and what sort of things I stood for. Did I have cartoon-themed box? Did I adorn my lunchbox with stickers, and if so, were they my stickers or ones I had traded for?

Lunchboxes were the semaphore of elementary school. I had a variety of box themes: Holly Hobby, Strawberry Shortcake and even a year where my tomboy nature shone bravely through with a Transformers lunchbox. In third grade I transitioned away from the tin lunchboxes that dented and rusted, to the new plastic ones that were slightly larger with rounded corners and oversized thermoses. They were just so cool. And the height of coolness was my third grade, plastic, Smurf lunchbox. Naturally it was blue. Even better, mine featured Smurfette prominently on the front. I loved it and had even placed a few sparkle stickers on the corners.

Enter Chris Johnson. Class bully. One morning, while we stood in line to enter school, his 9-year-old energy suddenly focused on me. With a loud quasi-karate shout, he leapt out of his spot in line and landed squarely on my lunchbox. It shattered into two jagged blue pieces; among other horrors, Smurfette was decapitated. I did the only thing I could - I burst into tears and ran and told the teacher. I was inconsolable for days. Eventually I got past it, and when I ran into Chris years later in the mall, I was able to smile and ask how he was doing, how had his life turned out? And oh, just by the by, did he happen to remember what on earth had possessed his little bully brain when he had destroyed my very favorite lunchbox!?

So, as I went to purchase my daughter her first lunchbox, I felt the weight of responsibility. Her first lunchbox would set the stage for all the rest to come. It was a palette to express herself. And the possible battleground for the bullies of her world.

The first thing I noticed was that synthetic, cloth lunchboxes were all the rage now. I was encouraged since cloth can't shatter no matter how much it is stomped on. The new boxes were also less rectangular and more like small little coolers or picnic bags. Additionally, there were all sorts of new-fangled innovations and secret compartments to keep the cool stuff cool and the crisp stuff crisp. Zippers every which way led to pockets that led to other little hidden spaces. It was like an entire Lewis Carroll world right inside the lunchbox. Lastly, the drinking cup was almost always on the outside, all the better to actually use and clean so that a warm-milk-lunchbox-funk didn't settle into all the other food products.

I was enthralled by the new designs and forced my daughter to sit with me in Target for 30 minutes asking her, "Do you like this faux-clutch-purse lunchbox with the quilted floral pattern? Or would you rather this futuristic pink mini-cooler with the lid that unzips to reveal an entire cup and plate system? Or, how about this one with the pink and green stripes that turns into an extra outfit and sleeping bag when you just unfold this hidden compartment?" She just stared at each one respectively and said, "Yes." It was clear

that she didn't feel the import of her decision. Finally we chose a pink one with a bright, floral, side-panel print, an externally attached water bottle, and only two hidden compartments.

I feel confident about her lunchbox, it says she is perky, smart and friendly; the fact that I hid an attack ninja warrior in one of the secret pockets will hopefully only work to her advantage should she encounter any bullies. I think we're ready, let the school season begin!

With suggestions or comments about The Baird Facts please contact Esther Baird at: esclaw@hotmail.com