

Thomas Conquers Arty the Smarty

By Dennis Payton Knight

“This is the story of a little fish. His name was Arty, and he was a smarty.” It was a brand-new book, just home from the store, and Thomas was barely four years old. He was a smarty too, so he snuggled closer to see the pictures and hear the words.

I had been lying down with Thomas to read to him at bedtime since the day we promoted our son from the crib. It was fun for us both, and I never saw it as a chore. I would follow the text with my finger as I read, never knowing if there was any point to that exercise.

We had many favorites to pick from, but, eventually Thomas began to learn his books by heart. I knew so because sometimes I would, as a test, change the words. It became a regular game, and he would happily scold and correct me.

Sometimes, too, I would get drowsy, and the story would depart in something of a dream state. Thomas thought that not a bit amusing, and he would complain, nudge, or kick me to continue properly.

Arty the Smarty, written by Faith McNulty and illustrated by Albert Aquino, was published in 1962 by Wonder Books. As I said, we had opened it together for the first time that evening. So, when the words I mouthed teasingly strayed from the lines on the page, I was amazed when Thomas strenuously protested.

“Dad! That is *not* what it says!”

I read the line correctly, continued properly for a couple of more pages, and then did it again, to the same protest.

“Well, then, you read it.”

I put *Arty the Smarty* in my son’s big little hands and followed over his shoulder. He warmed to the task, slowly at first, but steadily. “One day Arty saw some little fish crying. Mean old crab made them cry. The little fish were afraid of mean old crab. Not Arty. Arty swam right up to the old crab. Mean old crab was eating his dinner. Arty took ahold of the crab’s dinner, and he pulled.”

Thomas read on, “Old crab wanted his dinner, and so he did not let go. Arty pulled and pulled, and pulled old crab around and around. Mean old crab was so dizzy he had to let go. He was so dizzy, he went around and around until he was far away.

“‘Arty is a smarty,’ cried the little fish. ‘He made the mean old crab go away.’”

Thomas read his brand-new book through to the end, where Arty un-smartly got himself swallowed by a whale, tickled himself out of the predicament, and made “a whale of a splash” in the climax.

That happened to be the first, but not the last of those bittersweet times in my life, where the son stepped in for the dad. Thomas had made a whale of a splash, and I was one proud father.