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# The Marvelous Thing That Came From A Spring: The Accidental Invention Of The Toy That Swept The Nation



## Synopsis

With magnificent dioramic illustrations, Gilbert Ford captures the joy, creativity, and determination behind the invention of an iconic, one-of-a-kind toy: the Slinky! One day, a spring fell from the desk of Richard James, an engineer and a dreamer. Its coils took a walk—and so did Richard's imagination. He knew right away that he had stumbled onto something marvelous. With the help of his wife, Betty, Richard took this ordinary spring and turned it into a plaything. But it wasn't just any old trinket—it was a Slinky, and it would become one of the most popular toys in American history.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

## Customer Reviews

K-Gr 2 • The history of an iconic toy is shared in this delightful title from award-winning illustrator Ford. Authoring his first nonfiction picture book, Ford introduces his readers to naval engineer Richard James and his wife, Betty James. Always a dreamer, Richard James watches in wonder one day as a torsion spring falls from a shelf in his office and its coils take a walk. In that moment, the seeds of an idea are planted in his imagination, and with the help of his family, Richard James invents a new toy. Through his ingenuity, a simple spring is transformed into the "Slinky, a one-of-a-kind thing!" After a hit demonstration to holiday shoppers at Gimbel's, Richard and Betty James's business becomes a thriving enterprise. Ford's forthright narrative is informative, and his

illustrations are as inventive as the engineer's amusing new toy. The pictures capture the can-do attitude of the mid-20th century United States and mirror the clever creativity the inventor needed to bring his sensational toy to kids and parents across the country. Found objects such as metal springs, dominoes, fuzzy pipe cleaners, and game pieces decorate the dioramic illustrations, adding a touch of whimsy to the scenes chronicling the Jameses' entrepreneurial journey. VERDICT Young scientists and kids at heart will appreciate this nostalgic look at a popular accidental invention. —Linda L. Walkins, Saint Joseph Preparatory High School, Boston

A Bank Street College of Education Best Children's Book of the Year (5-8 category)\*STARRED REVIEW\* "The Slinky, one of the great toy sensations of the 20th century, was born during WWII, when naval engineer Richard James noticed a torsion spring's unusual properties...." Ford (Mr. Ferris and His Wheel) writes with reportorial concision, and his visual style is elaborately and ingeniously playful, capturing both a midcentury American optimism and the tinkerer mindset. His photographed dioramas are assembled from expressive paper doll figures, two-dimensional drawings, and three-dimensional objects." (Publishers Weekly, July 2016, \*STARRED REVIEW\*)"Who hasn't had fun with a Slinky at some point in childhood? This toy has been ubiquitous since its creation in the mid-twentieth century, and its origin story will grab young readers and might spur would-be inventors to think about the way simple things capture imaginations. Meanwhile, older readers will have fun pinpointing all the vintage treasure Ford uses to embellish his three-dimensional set-piece illustrations: from dominoes and pick-up sticks, to plastic sedans and dollhouse sofas, he imaginatively uses childhood's commonplaces to add pizzazz. The story itself...is fascinating.... Readers intrigued by the origins of commonplace things will find this a fulfilling piece of nonfiction." (Booklist, July 2016)"The history of an iconic toy is shared in this delightful title from award-winning illustrator Ford. Authoring his first nonfiction picture book, Ford introduces his readers to naval engineer Richard James and his wife, Betty James. Always a dreamer, Richard James watches in wonder one day as a torsion spring falls from a shelf in his office and its coils take a walk. In that moment, the seeds of an idea are planted in his imagination, and with the help of his family, Richard James invents a new toy.... Ford's forthright narrative is informative, and his illustrations are as inventive as the engineer's amusing new toy. The pictures capture the can-do attitude of the mid-20th century United States and mirror the clever creativity the inventor needed to bring his sensational toy to kids and parents across the country. Found objects such as metal springs, dominoes, fuzzy pipe cleaners, and game pieces

decorate the dioramic illustrations, adding a touch of whimsy to the scenes chronicling the Jameses' entrepreneurial journey. VERDICT: "Young scientists and kids at heart will appreciate this nostalgic look at a popular accidental invention." (School Library Journal, July 2016) "[A] lively and visually entertaining tale. Illustrations created from cutouts, painted backgrounds, and...lots of kids' period dollhouse furniture, toy vehicles, and games...will prove as fascinating for many readers as the narration itself. Pair this with Chris Barton's Whoosh! (BCCB 6/16) on the invention of the Super Soaker for a crowd-pleasing invention-themed story time." (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, July/August 2016) "This quick read with colorful illustrations makes the history of this iconic toy accessible and engaging for young readers. Full page whimsical dioramas that are a combination of drawings and real objects will capture readers' attention and bring the story to life.... An appealing read about a familiar toy that students can easily connect with." (School Library Connection, October 2016, Recommended) "A memorable toy slunk into baby boomers' lives in the 1950s. What fun to read about how Slinky got its start in "The Marvelous Thing That Came from a Spring," a book that celebrates happenstances and toys of old.... Ford's rendition details "The Accidental Invention of the Toy That Swept the Nation" in entertaining text, and illustrations conceived in a most unique way.... Everything from how the toy got its name, to doubts others had about its success and more are included in this book, proof-positive that non-fiction can be fun to read, and informative. This one should appeal to readers in first through fourth grade." (The Missourian Online, November 2016)

Richard James sat at his desk, wistfully looking off at a pile of books and a spring. There were piles of paper in the waste bin, springs all over the floor, and a few on a shelf. Richard "worked as an engineer for the United States Navy" and he had a job to do. That one little job was to create an invention "that would keep fragile ship equipment from vibrating in choppy seas." He tried this, he tried that, and that and this, but not a single one of his springs would do. All of a sudden, one of his springs fell down from a shelf and onto those books. The torsion spring hit his books and \*boing\* ... it walked across his desk at him! Hmmm! This was a most unusual spring, something Richard had never encountered before. He turned it this way and that in his hands, thinking it "might not work for the navy's ships," but the spring could just be something very special! Richard showed it to his wife, Betty, and then his son, Tom. Tom "let it go from the top of the stairs." Down, down, down it went as they watched. "I

think it's a toy! Richard exclaimed to his family, but what would they call it? Betty's eyes grew tired as she passed her time poring through the dictionary. Of course it was a "Slinky," because the definition was just right and it even sounded like one. Betty decided that little torsion spring would be the "Slinky: A One-Of-A-Kind Thing!" The long journey of the Slinky had begun, but like the Slinky heading down the stairs, everyone turned them down, down, down. It wasn't looking good for Richard and Betty, but finally one store decided to give it a try. Gimbels was going to let Richard demonstrate how it worked to the holiday shoppers. Richard waited and waited for Betty to arrive to help, but she just wasn't in the store. He "took a deep breath and let the Slinky go. Down, down, down the ramp it went. Was this one-of-a-kind toy going to be a flop? This is a marvelously fun tale about the Slinky that children will love. Well, add me to that list because I thoroughly enjoy the tale of this "accidental invention." Of course Richard was a dreamer and without that imagination, none of us would have ever enjoyed the Slinky's trek down our stairs. The ever-popular toy has given generations of children a glimpse at just what a torsion spring can do. The artwork has a great retro look that will bring the reader right back into the 1940s. In the back of the book is a brief historical overview of alternate uses of the Slinky and a bit more about Richard and Betty James.

There's a Biblio with additional book resources to explore. Ages: 4 to 8

Those of us who are old enough to remember those original slinkies will enjoy reading this book to a child. The illustrations are colorful and unique, combining real objects, such as dominoes, chenille, old toys, and springs, with cutout paper figures and simple drawings. Some of the pictures are framed in things like rulers and pickup sticks. The illustrations are clever and fun to peruse. The story is all about a Navy engineer who accidentally created a toy from a torsion spring that fell from a shelf. He and his wife went on to name and learn to produce the "Slinky." The true story is quite interesting in itself, but if you read the story to a child, who may have never played with a Slinky, I strongly recommend buying one to accompany the book. The experience will be greatly enhanced. All types and sizes of Slinkies are available today, though none seem to measure up to the original for we oldsters. Still, there's a lot of fun to be had for you and your child with this fine book and a "Slinky."

I read the entire book in 5 minutes and love it. The colors, images, letters, everything is so bright

and well prepared. The story begins with some facts about history in US, and then tells the story of how a now popular toy was invented. I won't tell you what it is, but it is totally worth it. The book is big and light. Everything about it is excellent. This can be used with small kids, pre teens and teens. Lots of vocabulary and verbs can be taught and then if you are a teacher, like me and like to keep your kids busy, you could even organize post reading activities. There are so many great things to do with this book, and let their imagination discover new things.

This fascinated some of my 2nd graders and bored others. I read it as a read aloud to the whole class, stopping along the way to check for understanding since there is a lot of text for a picture book. We were able to have some good conversations about time periods, inventions and perseverance from that reading. It later became part of my class library and there were a couple of kids who enjoyed checking it out now and again. I am going to teach 3rd grade this year and may introduce the book again to see if there are more children who are more mature and can understand it better.

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