

Children's books

I have worked with kids off and on for much of my life. I love books. The combination of these two things means that I have read a lot of children's books. Some I have memorized because I love them, like *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. A few others have been memorized because the kids love them, including *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* by Eric Carle. I really like some of Eric Carle's books, especially *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, but some of his books just don't stand up to quite as many readings as I've had to give.

I like having a copy of the books I love and an extra copy so I can share them. One of my favorites is *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch. It's a princess and a dragon story, but for once the princess doesn't have to be rescued by anyone else. She's strong, smart, and brave, and she recognizes stupidity when she sees it. She is an amazing role model. She stands on her own, does what she needs to do, and doesn't put up with anything she doesn't have to.

I grew up hating princesses. Not actual princesses, since I never met any, but Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and their ilk irritated me no end. They were useless. When I was very little I wanted to know why they hadn't just told Sleeping Beauty about the spindle problem so she could avoid it. It didn't make sense to me that someone didn't at least mention it. She never saw a spindle and no one ever warned her, so when it came time for her to prick her finger, she was clueless. That wasn't completely the princess' fault, but it seemed like a very bad idea to me. I never much liked happily ever after, either. Perhaps the princes were just as dim as the princesses, but I couldn't imagine finding things to talk about with someone who couldn't think well enough to realize that the dwarves might actually have a reason to tell the princess not to take things from creepy old ladies. Especially

once the princess had already done it once. "Oh, it's a different creepy old lady. It will be fine this time!" Really? "It's my birthday and a terrifying person wants to take me away from everyone I know to give me a present. I'll go!" I know four year olds with more sense than that. I have enjoyed some rewritings of fairy tales, especially Robin McKinley's, because the princesses are people I can understand. I like smart, strong women, not simpering people who can't or won't do anything to protect themselves.

I've been reading the Pinkerton books to some kids lately. I hadn't seen them before, but they are about a Great Dane named Pinkerton who gets into all kinds of interesting trouble. The kids love the books, especially when they get to read them to Nyx. They like telling her that Pinkerton is just like her except that she's better at not knocking people over. That definitely amuses me!

I like reading with kids partly because I like seeing them get involved in the stories and think about the characters, partly because they are learning, partly because it's a comfortable, good way to be close to someone, and partly because I love watching when they figure out that the things I'm pointing at and the words I'm saying are the same, and they can read them. One of the kids I'm around a lot right now is eight years old. She can just recently learned to read, and she's gotten excited about it. It's more fun for me when they are interested.

Anything by Graeme Base is on my list of books I love. Not only are the pictures amazing, the stories can hold the attention of almost any age. There are puzzles and things to look for in every book, but the basic stories are accessible for very young readers. I have spent hours poring over these books, working through the puzzles, and I have spent even more hours with kids curled up next to me, fascinated, as we read each book.

The most recent children's book that made an impression, though, was *Ian's Walk: A Story about Autism* by Karen Ritz. The narrator is Ian's sister, Julie. She and her older sister take Ian, who has autism, for a walk to the park. Being a sibling of a person with a disability, I can identify with the discomfort that Julie feels at times, but I can identify even more strongly with the love that is clearly evident. The autistic behaviors are very well done and not overdone, which was good to see. The book doesn't preach or expect the reader to feel sorry for Ian. I really appreciated that. It explains autism in ways kids can understand. I think it would be an excellent book for helping children understand differences. It doesn't show all facets of autism, of course, but it is a very effective tool for teaching and it hits exactly the mixed feelings that can come from loving someone deeply and still being a little embarrassed by them. *Ian's Walk* shows one person's differences and reactions to them very well, honestly, and carefully. I usually felt anger at the world's responses rather than embarrassment about my little brother, who has Down Syndrome, but there were a few moments, like when he was terrified of a ceiling fan and ended up sitting under the table at a restaurant, that it was hard for me not to feel a little embarrassed, even as I glared at the people who had the temerity to stare. I love my brother dearly and I am fiercely proud of who he is. I will get a copy of this book for our ever-expanding library.

I'm sure I will come up with other books that I feel you should know about, but that's all for the moment.