Books Children Love

- KidsPost Reprint: “Author Beverly Cleary dies at 104: The writer of more than 40 children’s books created characters generations of kids could relate to.”

- Post Reprint: “Cleary’s gift to girls: Ramona with zest”

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Books and Childhood

The Library of Congress in 2000 recognized Beverly Cleary as a Living Legend. Cleary, who passed away on March 25 at 104, had begun writing children’s books partly to answer the question of one of the boys who came to the library in Yakima, Wash., where she was a children’s librarian — “Where are the books about us?”

As David von Drehle believes, “She wrote brilliantly about childhood as it really is. Most of the writers who have tried — even those, such as Judy Blume, who were inspired by Cleary — drift toward the adjacent category of ‘young adult’ writing, which isn’t the same; it broadens the canvas and enlarges the palette. To inhabit the lives of children without distorting or condescending is an imaginative feat of the highest order.”

Writers of children’s literature take us to The Snowy Day and introduce The Giver and Bud, Not Buddy but they also bring the Wild Things to life. Contemporary children’s book authors can be found in print and online in KidsPost Readers’ Corner.

Not all books are appreciated. As National Library Week is celebrated, The American Library Association (ALA released its list of more than 273 books that were challenged or banned in libraries and schools — even though most libraries and schools were closed in 2020. “Demands to remove books addressing racism and racial justice or those that shared the stories of Black, Indigenous, or people of color grew in number,” stated the ALA. “At the same time, books addressing themes and issues of concern for LGBTQIA+ people continued to dominate the list.”

We focus on the writers of children’s books and the multitude of worlds, people and adventures they bring to childhood.
Author Beverly Cleary dies at 104

The writer of more than 40 children’s books created characters generations of kids could relate to.

When Cleary encountered the boy, she was trying to write a book about “a sensitive girl.” “No ideas would come. So I started a book about a boy.”

Children worldwide came to love the adventures of Huggins and neighbors Ellen Tebbits, Otis Spofford, Beatrice “Beezus” Quimby and her younger sister, Ramona. They inhabit a down-home, wholesome setting on Klickitat Street — a real street in Portland, Oregon, the city where Cleary spent much of her youth.

Ramona, perhaps her best-known character, made her debut in “Henry Huggins” with only a brief mention.

“All the children appeared to be only children so I tossed in a little sister and she didn’t go away. She kept appearing in every book,” she told the Associated Press in 2016 telephone interview from her California home.

Cleary was an only child and said the character wasn’t based on her.

“I was a well-behaved little girl, not that I wanted to be,” she said. “At the age of Ramona, in those days, children played outside. We played hopscotch and jump rope, and I loved them and always had scraped knees.”

In all, there were eight books on Ramona. “Ramona and Her Mother” earned a National Book Award. Two other Ramona stories were named Newbery Honor books. (An unrelated book, “Dear Mr. Henshaw,” won the Newbery Medal in 1984.)

Cleary said she tried not to play favorites among her characters.

“I like all of them, or I wouldn’t have written about them,” she told KidsPost. “But I supposed Ramona was [my favorite] because I was a little girl.”

After writing more than 40 books, Cleary put away her pen in 1999. More recently she rereleased three of her most cherished books with three famous fans writing forewords for the new editions.

Actress Amy Poehler penned the front section of “Ramona Quimby, Age 8”; author Judy Blume wrote the foreword for “Henry Huggins” and author Kate DiCamillo wrote the opening for the fantasy “The Mouse and the Motorcycle.”

Cleary was born Beverly Bunn on April 12, 1916, in McMinnville, Oregon, and lived on a farm in Yamhill until her family moved to Portland when she was school-age. She was a slow reader, which she blamed on illness and a mean-spirited first-grade teacher.

In third grade she was flipping through a library book called “The Dutch Twins,” which her mother had brought home. She had a revelation.

“I discovered I was reading … and enjoying it,” she told KidsPost.

She became an avid reader from then on.

As her 100th birthday neared in 2016, more than a dozen children’s authors — including DiCamillo, R.J. Palacio, Jarrett Krosoczka and Jeff Kinney — shared their appreciation of Cleary with KidsPost. Many of them said Cleary’s greatness as a writer was her ability to make kids see themselves in her books.

“There are no special effects,” Kinney said. “There are no vampires or anything like that. It’s just the magic of ordinary, everyday life.”

Is your favorite author a Beverly Cleary fan, too?

Popular children’s writers talk about being influenced by the creator of Ramona Quimby. ■
Among the many indignities endured by Ramona Quimby is a midyear progress report sent home by her first-grade teacher, which informs her parents that she is a busybody and needs “to learn to keep her hands to herself.” Ramona, devastated and misunderstood, tries to explain: She wasn’t bugging her seatmate, she was trying to help him. She was doing her very best.

There, in the penultimate chapter of “Ramona the Brave,” our 6-year-old heroine collapses in tears. Her mother pats her back and murmurs, “What are we going to do with you?”

And then: “With red eyes, a swollen face, and a streaming nose, Ramona sat up and glared at her mother. ‘Love me!’”

Ramona, sigh. Headstrong and exasperating and grubby and irrepressible. She tries to crack a hard-boiled egg on her head; it turns out the egg is raw. Her sheep costume isn’t finished in time for the Nativity play; she is forced onstage in her pajamas. The family’s cat passes away, and though he never liked Ramona anyway, she still frets over the correct liturgy for a feline funeral.

Beverly Cleary, whose death at 104 was announced Friday, first introduced Ramona as a minor character in a different children’s novel. But over the next 50 years and eight books, she became her own protagonist, a real girl suffering the real problems of childhood, in all of their smallness and their enormity.

“She does not suffer fools. She is full of vim and vigor,” wrote Amy Poehler in the forward of a recently rereleased Ramona novel. “Ramona was a pest! She was irascible and uncompromising! She was allowed to be angry and not afraid to stand up to boys!”

Today these traits would be unremarkable for a female literary heroine — standard, even, obsessed as we are now with the hazy notion of “strong female characters.” In 1950, when Ramona made her first appearance, they were not unremarkable; they were trailblazing. Cleary took every attribute that girls were warned away from — bossiness, brashness, hot tempers — and tucked them all into one character: the indefatigable Ramona Quimby, a protagonist who became an inspiration for many who carried the lessons into adulthood.

First lady Jill Biden put it more simply. “Millions of girls saw themselves in Ramona Quimby,” she tweeted on Friday, upon learning of Cleary’s passing. “Thank you from all the ‘pests’ out there.”
To identify with Ramona Quimby was to understand that the world didn’t fit you yet, but it might one day. To hold your loved ones to high standards, and yourself to even higher ones. To belt out “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall” at top volume in the middle of a rainstorm and to — just once, just for the bragging rights — get all the way down to one bottle of beer.

To identify with Ramona Quimby was to never question whether you were too improper, too loud, too much. To insist on a truer reflection of your burgeoning self than a princess in a fairy tale. To demand that space be made for you, and for all the girls like you, who have more than once heard someone murmur, “What are we going to do with you?”

_Love me._

_Love me._

What a brave and beautiful request. Some days we are all snot-filled and red-eyed, wishing the world would better understand us.

Some days we are not princesses or princes; we are grubby, unyielding, irrepressible children, asking for the one thing every one of us deserves. ■
The Great Dr. Seuss Hysteria of 2021 shows how silly and unimaginative adults can be

BY ALYSSA ROSENBERG

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Now that beloved children’s-book author Dr. Seuss is an “outlaw,” per House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), and conservative pundit Ben Shapiro is stockpiling strategic reserves of “If I Ran the Zoo,” parents across the land face a desperate conundrum. What can they possibly read to their children?

If that paragraph makes no sense, good for you: The Great Seuss Hysteria of 2021 is a faux controversy if there ever were one, worth following only for what it reveals about children’s literature and the limits of adults’ imaginations.

The short, sensible summary is as follows. Dr. Seuss Enterprises, which controls Theodor Geisel’s copyrights, decided not to print more copies of six works that contain racist imagery. This ought to be relatively uncontroversial. The books won’t be pulled from public consumption, as Disney did with “Song of the South,” or edited to comport with different values. No one proposes treating Dr. Seuss like Woody Allen, a figure whose alleged transgressions render his work untouchable. Everyone seems comfortable with the other 90 percent of Dr. Seuss’s books. But because conservatives don’t do much except fight the culture wars these days, they inflated an act of corporate image-burnishing into a catastrophic book-burning, and the rest of the story is predictable.

Amid this thicket of dishonest outrage, however, it’s useful to recognize two things that are actually true. First, some Dr. Seuss books for children contain depictions of people of color that, like his cartoons of Japanese people during World War II, are repulsive. Second, insisting that Dr. Seuss books are the alpha and omega of children’s literature shows a tiresome lack of imagination.

As the parent of a toddler, I’ve been recently reacquainted with the Seussian canon: “Green Eggs and Ham” and “Happy Birthday to You!” are in heavy rotation in our home — and their limitations are clear.

The wordplay can be fun, but its cleverness is undercut by Geisel’s penchant for invented words, which is a kind of cheat. Anyone can stick a rhyme scheme or invent a clever rhythm if they don’t confine themselves to the English language. Political fables like “The Lorax” and “Yertle the Turtle” are all well and good, if a little dated in their scolding tone. And the Cat in the Hat, perhaps Seuss’s most famous character, is more frenetic than emotionally engaging.

Were I to assemble a canonical list of children’s-book authors, Dr. Seuss would rank below, say, Peter Spier, the Dutch-American illustrator whose gorgeous picture books were a staple of my childhood and now are vital reading again a generation later.

“Heads Above the Ground” is one of six Dr. Seuss books that will no longer be printed.
ago artists could look at difference with excitement, not viciousness. “Bored — Nothing to Do,” about two brothers who occupy themselves by building a propeller plane, and “Oh, Were They Ever Happy!,” which follows three children as they decide to paint the house while their parents are out, are charming tributes to youthful ingenuity and imagination.

I’d also list the husband-and-wife team of Alice and Martin Provensen, and the writer and illustrator Barbara Cooney. Among the former’s accomplishments are “Our Animal Friends at Maple Hill Farm” and “A Year at Maple Hill Farm,” which depict a world that is more bravely engaged with the realities of life, death and idiosyncrasy than the one Dr. Seuss’s characters occupied. And in books such as “Miss Rumphius” and “Hattie and the Wild Waves,” Cooney offered readers, particularly girls, glimpses of life that are unconventional but graspable.

And at risk of letting a list of past masters dominate this column, let us turn to the present. What a gift it is to have Mo Willems’s help in probing the complex emotions and everyday dilemmas of childhood in, among other books, his Elephant & Piggie series. During a year of isolation, Raúl the Third’s Little Lobo books have transported our family to the markets and lucha libre rings of a Mexican border town. And as much as “Please, Baby, Please” has inspired our child to new heights of misbehavior, it’s a pure delight to have an artist as remarkable as Kadir Nelson making work for the very youngest readers.

Cooney famously said, “Children in this country need a more robust literary diet than they are getting … . It does not hurt them to read about good and evil, love and hate, life and death. Nor do I think they should read only about things that they understand … a man’s reach should exceed his grasp. So should a child’s.”

No, Dr. Seuss has not been canceled. But if the only author we think to reach for is Dr. Seuss, our children’s literary worlds will be smaller and poorer for our lack of curiosity.
What Makes a Children’s Literature Author Special?

The Library of Congress defines children’s literature as “material written and produced for the information and entertainment of children and young adults. It includes all non-fiction, literary and artistic genres and physical formats.” After WWII, works emerged for the teenage or young adult reader. Authors J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Roald Dahl, and more recently, J.K. Rowling and Stephenie Meyer are considered YA authors.

The age and maturity of children, the interests and reading skills are also factors in distinguishing children’s literature from young adult works. How do you make the distinction?

The Caldecott Medal for the most distinguished picture book for children and the Newbery Medal awarded for the most distinguished contributions to American literature for children are the two oldest honors to recognize American artists and authors. They often recognize works and authors who become classics and hold a special place.

BEVERLY CLEARY
1. Beverly Cleary grew up in Oregon, was a librarian in Yakima, Washington, and wrote books read by several generations. What made her books so appealing? When she passed away at 104 in 2021, many wrote about her characters, her stories and her.
   a. Read the KidsPost memory piece, “Author Beverly Cleary dies at 104: The writer of more than 40 children’s books created characters generations of kids could relate to.” What are three main ideas that KidsPost has about Beverly Cleary?
   b. Read Post columnist Monica Hesse’s commentary on Beverly Cleary and her contribution to children’s literature, “Cleary’s gift to girls: Ramona with zest.” What three ideas does she stress in her column?
   c. Have you read any of Beverly Cleary’s books? Do you have a favorite book or character? Write 1-3 paragraphs about this. Do you agree that Cleary was a special author?

DR. SEUSS
1. Most children have had a Dr. Seuss book read to them or read them on their own.
   a. Do you have a favorite book or Seussian character? What makes it appealing?
   b. Read “The Great Dr. Seuss Hysteria of 2021 shows how silly and unimaginative adults can be” by Post columnist Alyssa Rosenberg. What recent news about six works by Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel) is the news peg of the column? What qualities does she highlight of Seuss favorites?
   c. Do you consider the Dr. Seuss Enterprises’ decision to be book banning if those who hold the copyright choose to print no more copies? Explain your response.
   d. Rosenberg nominates other titles and authors. She explains why she would encourage reading of these additional authors and works. Have you read any of them? What qualities does she admire?
   e. Rosenberg quotes children’s author and illustrator Barbara Cooney: “Children in this country need a more robust literary diet than they are getting …. It does not hurt them to read about good and evil, love and hate, life and death. Nor do I think they should read only about things they understand … a man’s reach should exceed his grasp. So should a child’s.”
      • What do you think of Cooney’s idea?
      • How might this concept apply to the decision to pull certain children’s works from circulation? Or to discontinue publishing certain books?
      • Can you think of any books that you have read in which the author has written about or included experiences from Cooney’s list? How did this add to your reading and life experiences?

YOUR NOMINATION
What book or which author would you nominate as a must-read children’s literature special experience? Write a personal essay on what makes this work, series of books and/or author the one children or young adults should read.
My Children’s Literature Experience

Early experiences with books vary. Some will recall visits to the library. Others still have the first books given to them, perhaps with teeth marks and ripped pages. Respond to the following prompts as best you can remember.

1. My very first book(s) was given to me by
   _____ a. My parent(s)
   _____ b. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents
   _____ c. A teacher
   _____ d. Other: ________________________________________________

2. My very first book was ________________________________ (title if known)
   _____ a. A picture book
   _____ b. An ABC book
   _____ c. Based on a movie or TV character
   _____ d. Other: ________________________________________________

3. Which of the following did you experience? You may check all that apply.
   _____ a. A caregiver or parent read in the afternoon with me.
   _____ b. My mother/father read a book with me before going to bed.
   _____ c. We went to the library for storytelling time.
   _____ d. We never read books in my home.

4. What experience with books in school did you most enjoy?

5. List your five favorite books from childhood.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. 
   e. 

6. List your five favorite authors from childhood.
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. 
   e. 
7. Think about the books that you enjoyed reading from before school through the fourth grade. Which would you recommend to younger siblings, students or teachers? Write a short summary (don’t give away endings) and tell why you recommend it.

8. What recent books have you read that were not assigned by a teacher? Do you think you are finding a type of book or author that you most enjoy? If you do not enjoy reading, can you explain why?

9. If you wrote an ABC book, what would the following letters picture?
   a. C
   b. N
   c. T
   d. V
   e. X, Y and Z

10. Think about a children’s book that you might write. Would it be based on something that happened to you? Would you have a moral or idea you would want to introduce to children? Would the characters be people, animals or mythic figures?

    Either write a summary of the book or write the first two to five pages of the story. For extra credit, add two illustrations or photographs.