

Cynthia Grady

Rhythms of Story

As a school librarian, I answer questions about books every day—in person, when creating book lists, or in published book reviews. One September morning, a fifth grader posed a question to me that I had never encountered before: “Do we have any books where nothing happens?”

I paused, first thinking she sought a book with internal rather than external action—not at all unusual for a girl who likes to read. But after a short conversation, I discovered something entirely different. We moved from discussing books “where nothing happens,” to books where *small* things happen, to books where big things happen in small ways, to, well, big things that happen in big ways, if the book is good.

What this student wanted was something written by a master stylist, a book where the language pulled her through the story, whatever the story happened to be. To paraphrase Ursula Le Guin, the student wanted a book in which the rhythms of language controlled the rhythms of story, though she couldn’t articulate that as such.

This experience occurred three years ago, and I haven’t yet stopped thinking about her question. Her reading preference isn’t necessarily an entry into the debate over the merits of literary versus popular fiction, and it isn’t necessarily a preference that girls would show over boys. It is a preference for intimacy, though, for an act of communion—the experience one has when the reader is at once storyteller, listener, and protagonist . . . and the writing disappears.

Michael Morpurgo’s *The Mozart Question* came to mind. In it, the enormity of the Nazi concentration camps is distilled into a narrative of 66 pages about a boy, a violin, a musician, and a writer. As I pulled it off the shelf, more “quiet” books, as we came to call them, began speaking to me. *The Color of My Words* by Lynn Joseph and *Flight of the Fisherbird* by Nora Martin. *The Executioner’s Daughter* by Laura E. Williams, too, takes the moral and political complexity of the times, the Middle Ages in this case, and renders it briefly, intimately.

I thought of books by Jacqueline Woodson, Kyoko Mori, Rita Williams-Garcia, Hilary McKay, David Almond, Gary Soto, and Richard Peck, nearly all of which would qualify as masterly works of style, though some are books for her later middle school years. I thought of several imports, including *Crow Girl* by Bodil Bredsdorff.

When I found myself returning to older titles, such as *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse, I had to check myself. Was I emphasizing an older book’s craftsmanship for some reason other than the language in which it was written? Might the older titles be remembered more finely because I read them when I wasn’t required to recommend books to 150+ students each week?

I also wondered, is fantasy *necessarily* left out of this conversation? Is that what this is about? No, *The New Policeman*, by Kate Thompson, even with its giant clash between faerie lore and Catholicism, works as a “quiet” book because of the telling, because of the language. Annie Barrow’s *Magic Half* works. So too, do the books of Nancy Farmer.

And what about humor? Funny that is written without the head-bonking hijinx of the three stooges is hard to come by with current publishing trends. But Rodman Philbrick’s *The Young Man and the Sea* is an adventurous, moving, and funny story told with graceful precision. *The Great Turkey Walk* by Kathleen Karr, too, is a finely wrought, funny book, and Terry Pratchett’s *The Wee Free Men*.

So the question, “Do we have any books where nothing happens?” was a provocative one. It stretched my ways of thinking about language, story, and children. I’ve had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on my own reading preferences. I’ve changed the manner in which I share books with students and others, and I’ve changed the way I approach my reviews for publication. Fifth graders are easy to please with such a bounty of books written for them; there is something for all kinds of readers in all kinds of moods. But this particular question told me what else students crave, most of all in this case—a mastery of craft.

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