



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Art done for pure joy cannot be measured with a yardstick of economic gain, material possessions, or numerical scores. It allows our spirits to sing and our souls to take flight.”

-Patricia Polacco, from *A Chance to Soar*, 1990

I have been reading books about and by Patricia Polacco, who is a children’s book author and illustrator. This in itself is unusual – to find someone who is comfortable with both words and art – and for that reason alone it is worth taking a look at some of her work, if you aren’t already familiar with it.

But there is much more to Polacco. In fact, it is difficult to know where to begin in describing what is outstanding about her books and her contribution to modern literature. I use the term literature, rather than children’s books, because I think her books have much to offer all of us. Her book *Pink and Say*, in particular, should be, as my step-daughter says, required reading for everyone. It is the true story, passed down in Polacco’s family, of two young Union soldiers and their relationship. It is about friendship and altruism, but most of all it offers a simple, poignant and powerful demonstration of the racism during that war.

I have to admit I discovered Polacco’s work after my children were grown – and after she had moved from Oakland, California, where she lived for thirty-seven years. I had occasionally looked at her books, but my initial reaction was of great admiration for her art, but I wasn’t so sure about the stories.

For instance, *The Keeping Quilt*, which is one of her most well-known, tells the family story of a quilt that has been handed down from generation to generation. It is a nostalgic story that tells much about the power of memories and family stories and it is beautifully done. My hesitation, I think, comes from my concern about children’s literature becoming more a conduit for an author’s story than a book written for its audience. I think this is a fine line, because of course there are many children’s book authors – Polacco included – who use their childhood in one way or another to tell a good and enter-

taining story.

Polacco’s other books carry her memories, also, but many of them have more tension and plot – making them, to my mind, more appealing to young readers and listeners.

Welcome Comfort tells the story of an overweight and shy young boy who is befriended by the school custodian and eventually ends up with one of the best jobs in the world. This theme of being an outcast yet having amazing skills is found in others of Polacco’s work and her childhood struggle with learning disabilities contributed much to the accuracy of the feelings exhibited by the characters.

Another favorite of mine is *Rechenka’s Eggs*, about Babushka and the wounded goose she takes in. This book includes detailed pictures of traditional Ukrainian eggs, which are made using wax and dyes. Part of the reason I like this book –

and another of hers, *Chicken Sunday* – is that I taught myself this process many years ago and my children and I, along with our friends, have been making these eggs for many years.

Perhaps this is the gift of Polacco’s books: She offers memories or feelings many of us can identify with. There is family, tradition, religion, monsters, animals, magic and a large amount of love. So much, in fact, that – according to an article called “Betty Doll’s Better Than Barbie” (*U.S. News & World Report* 2001) – some critics have accused her of “sappiness.” But, the article quotes her as saying, “If I’m too sentimental, so be it.”