



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.”

-Mark Twain, 1835-1910

I’ve been reading children’s fiction lately- primarily books for fourth through sixth-graders. I have a stack next to my bed, on the coffee table, on the kitchen table - it’s as if they follow me around.

I’m reading them for a class and the assignment is to find 6 books in the same genre. I decided to read books about children and World War II, and so I started with *Snow Treasure*, by Marie McSwigan, an adventure story about Denmark and the Holocaust and a group of children who bravely help some Jewish families.

Next, I read Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, in which Hannah is transported back in time, away from a Seder, and into the very beginning of the war. She tries to warn people about what is going to happen, but no one will believe her and she finally realizes maybe it is better to let them be innocent for a while. I also read *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, in which again children are able to

show how brave and caring they can be.

By the time I had gotten to *Surviving Hitler*, a biography of Jack Mandelbaum by Andrea Warren, and had sat with tears trickling down my cheeks yet another time, I realized maybe I should take another look at my plan. So I switched to what one of our librarians called “plucky kids” - keeping the first three, but then branching out. I remembered the feeling I had when I finished *Snow Treasure* - that exhilaration that comes with experiencing the world along with a hero or heroine who takes chances and gets scared but everything works out in the end. Avi’s *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* easily fit into this category, since it is the story of a refined young girl in 1832 who ends up being the only passenger on a ship with a hated captain and an angry crew.

As I finished that book and Ann Rinaldi’s *Taking Liberty*, based on a true story

continued on page 2

and her anguish in choosing freedom over security, I started thinking about the difference between these books and the adult books I usually read. These young protagonists were tough and resilient and brave – and an inspiration to any reader. I realized I couldn’t easily think of an adult book that left me with the same feeling; that “I could do it, too” feeling. Why is this?

When I asked my sister, she told me: “Don’t you know there is a secret society of women in the world who read the *Anne of Green Gables* series over and over for that very reason?” I couldn’t believe she said that, since not long ago I quietly brought home the whole set and read them, one by one, with pleasure and comfort.

But that didn’t really answer my question. Another person I asked mentioned Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but even though it is for

adults, it is told in the voice of Scout, a child. And my favorite grown-up book this year, *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, is also in a child’s voice.

So, after much thought, I’ve decided that when we grow up, we aren’t supposed to dream about being brave or changing the world or just following our curiosity to see where it leads. Somehow, those feelings have been relegated to childhood and if we have them, then we are considered childlike.

But maybe I’m wrong and it’s more a reflection of the books I’ve read and the impressions I have. What do you think?