



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Shirley Jackson wrote in a variety of forms and styles because she was, like everyone else, a complex human being, confronting the world in many different roles and moods. She tried to express as much of herself as possible in her work, and to express each aspect as fully and purely as possible.”

-Stanley Edgar Hyman,
from the introduction to
*The Magic of Shirley
Jackson*

From time to time, when I’m sitting at the children’s desk or the reference desk at my library, I will hear the clear and unrestrained voice of a young library user. Sometimes this child is talking to me and sometimes to another staff member. Either way, I find it moving that a three- or four-year-old can hold forth on the wonders of a book, and it helps me remember my childhood, my children and the reason I work in libraries. This is one of the pleasures of working as a children’s librarian – the repeated chance to visit and revisit the charm of our young library users.

And how many times have I had that same desire: to corner someone and thrust a recently read book onto them, whether or not I have been asked for a recommendation. Of course, adults do this, too – even in the middle of a reference question, I will find myself engaged in a conversation about a new author or an old author’s new book. I think these

conversations – whether with children or adults – are a critical part of my job. They are about booklovers exchanging not only the simple facts, but also the deep understanding that books are an essential part of our lives.

There have been times when I’ve been having one of these exchanges and another patron will impatiently interrupt to ask a question. When I first starting working at the reference desk, I would feel guilty about having this brief and personal conversation, and I would abruptly stop it so I could answer the real question. However, I have come to understand that sometimes the question isn’t obvious and the answer is even less so, but the connection between two book lovers is just as valid as the answer to a question like: Where is your computer section?

The other part of this is the very confidence displayed by these book-loving children. I recently had a conversation

with a youngster who was looking through one of our picture books and discovered a torn page. With the knowledge that adults are the people to go to for things like this and without shyness or a reluctance to share her thoughts, she brought me the book and showed me the page. I carefully taped the small tear and handed the book back to her, since I could see she was eager to hang on to it.

In fact, she gave me an overview of the plot and the high points of the book, much the way a children’s librarian will give something called a “booktalk” – which is basically giving someone enough information about the book to get them to read it.

Her self-assurance really made me pause. And when I heard her describing her book to one of the clerks at the check-out desk – where she was barely tall enough to be seen – it made me smile. As I watched

her skip away, books in her arms, I wished every child could keep forever the knowledge that what they think and say is important. It is, in fact, what makes each of us unique – and that’s a good thing. Sometimes it seems like we spend more time trying to be the same as everyone else and not enough time being glad we’re not.