



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
June 16, 2006

*"I love our earth...for
wet forests that drip,
and dry winds that drift,
or cool mosses that
grow,
and warm sunsets that
glow."*

-from *I Love Our Earth*

As I was recently reading my way through the latest arrivals of new children's books, my attention was caught by the four arresting photographs on the cover of a picture book called *I Love Our Earth*, by Bill Martin Jr. and Michael Sampson, with photographs by Dan Lipow. These pictures show two young children, a blue sky full of wispy white clouds, and a dirt road through what looks like a plowed hay field.

Because of the title, my first thought was this was going to be yet another one of those children's books with a message - and only a message. A book weighed down by its writers' desire to educate or inform or even shape young children. There are many, many of these books - books written by those who see children as people without senses of humor, taste or preferences. Or who see them as yet another consumer group, another profitable market.

Many of these authors

have good intentions, I know. They have taken their feelings about an important issue, like respect or acceptance or bullying, and tried to create a venue for concerned adults to initiate discussion. Some of these books serve this purpose well, and I respect both the need for them and the author's commitment.

But since every child has a sensibility of his or her own, it is essential there be books for them that are of value outside of the message. An excellent children's book should be a pleasure to read. The words should stand strong on the page and be creative or interesting or exciting. They should be worth considering, remembering and feeling.

A young child can only grow to love books if the books are worth loving. And the wonder of language is that it can be simple yet powerful, plain yet humorous, spare yet driving. *I Love Our Earth* is a wonderful example of simplicity at its beautiful best. Page by page,

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photographs of children from all over the world are juxtaposed with page-filling local scenes. Each is captioned in a large friendly black text that is striking in its accomplishment of child-friendly words and vivid images. How can one resist “where green grasses ripple” or “where blue oceans curl”? Children who hear this book will take in those words and be inspired to hear them over and over, to repeat them, and perhaps to even create some words of their own. Because if there is anything that can move a child to creativity, it is the presence of outstanding examples of it in their lives.

This is a book full of messages, yet they are presented with an awareness of the importance of beauty and sound. The happy young faces of these international children will affirm for any child there is a world and they are part of it. The colors alone could be dis-

cussed for hours. What are the colors in that sunset? How many hues of gold and green can you find in one sheaf of wheat? Is red too simple a word to describe the brilliance of the tulips?

The scenes, too, will provoke questions and thoughts. Some – like the stark ridged desert or the star-filled sky – may be unfamiliar to an urban child, and readers can take the opportunity to talk about what these are and the children who are comfortable with them.

There are other books as memorable as this one and I think it is worth taking the time to find them. They are the ones that help shape the mind and conscience of a child, and in this fast-paced world, that is good.