



## AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein  
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***“Then we played horses with my other bestest friend named Lucille...And we all ran to Room Nine speedy quick...”***

-From Sara Park's *Junie B. Jones and Some Squeaky Peeky Spying*

One of my first assignments as a member of the School-Age Programs and Service Committee for the Association for Library Service to Children has been to help annotate a list of early readers, so teachers, parents, librarians and children can know in advance a little about the books.

It's not always easy to summarize a book in one sentence, but nonetheless, I like doing it. I've had some experience with this, since one of my children's literature library school classes required us to read 10 books a week and write a brief description of each one. I remember how satisfying it was to see how many words I could get into a sentence without making it cumbersome or difficult to read.

Each committee member was given six titles, ranging from earliest readers to third grade level. As I worked my way through my list, I didn't critique the books - I simply tried to write a brief but interesting description. It wasn't

until I got to the last and longest book that I paused. This book, *Clarice Bean: Don't Look Now* by Lauren Child, was one I hadn't read. At 254 pages it took longer than any of the others and I when I finished I had mixed feelings about it.

I can see why it was chosen. The main character, Clarice, is spunky, sensitive, emotional and likeable. She worries a lot and in fact keeps a worry journal, and I imagine this is comforting for any child who also worries. The book flows well and there are clever plot ideas. It is a thoughtful book in many ways and I'm glad I read it.

My discomfort comes from the language she uses, in particular the grammar and the made-up words. Both surprised me because on the whole Clarice uses language correctly. But occasionally the author has tossed in a sentence like, "I forget that me and Karl aren't speaking anymore" or "I still do think Karl is acting weird-ishly..." The style reminds me

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of Junie B. Jones books, which – because of their grammar and wording – have inspired much discussion, both for and against. The grammar in these is consistently incorrect.

I firmly believe it is better to have a child reading than not. I am not against comic books or graphic novels or magazines or series books. It takes regular practice to become a confident reader and books like Junie B. are perfect for beginning readers, because they are engaging and simple to read. But I am still uncomfortable with the language.

One of the distinctions of Clarice Bean and Junie B. is that they are written in the first person, unlike many of the other early readers. Junie B. is five years old in the early books, then six in the later ones. Clarice is 8 in the book I read.

So, these authors are imagining how a child this age would speak. The problem for me is that I don't know any children that age who speak like these characters. Possibly that is the allure of these books – children can be amused by the poor grammar and made-up words because they themselves don't speak like that. And maybe that's okay – I just don't know.

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I can't help wondering, though, if these books would be as popular if Junie B. and Clarice spoke more like the average child and less like a stereotype. Would the adventures and insights and characters be as engrossing? I think they would.