



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“When I was a kid, growing up in Iowa, I didn’t know that just anyone could pick up a pencil and write stories. I thought you had to have permission, maybe, or someone else had to designate you as an official writer.”

-Kimberly K. Jones
(kimberlykjones.com)

I recently read a new children’s book I loved. In fact, I think Kimberly K. Jones’ *Sand Dollar Summer* should be nominated for a Newbury, because it is vivid and memorable and full of familiar yet beautifully described childhood feelings. After I finished it, I started to think about other children’s books that have prompted me to sit and think for a while, sorry to be finished yet replete with the story and the characters. Two more came to mind.

First *Sand Dollar Summer*.

This first novel begins: “The sea gives, and the sea takes away. The sea gave me a great deal, but fickle at it is, it tried to steal it back and nearly me with it.” Narrated by precocious, articulate, almost thirteen-year-old Lise, this is a story about the sea and Lise’s brother and mother. We hear about her mother’s car accident and the subsequent move to the beach for the summer. We come to understand her great fear of the sea, her immense love for her family

and her need to keep those she loves with her. Perhaps what is most powerful about this book is the way Jones has made the sea a character in the book, as Lise struggles against it and the influence it seems to have over her mother. Although this is a novel written for children, I recommend it to people of all ages.

The next book is Frances O’Roark Dowell’s *Chicken Boy*. Whenever I try to convince an adult to read a children’s book, *Chicken Boy* heads my list. It is a simple story about a boy, Tobin, and how he meets the many challenges in his life. Tobin tells the story with a voice the reader can only grow to love, as he displays his toughness, caring and accurate observations about the world. Like Lise, Tobin is wise beyond his years and yet he acts in ways that suit his age.

The story is centered on a new friendship with his classmate Henry, who raises chickens and is on a quest to prove to everyone that chickens have souls. In one of their first con-

versations he tells Tobin:

“It was the chickens who made me realize that life is right in front of us, but we just ignore it...I’d never seen one up close...I’d never experienced an actual chicken.”

“You weren’t missing much,” Tobin tells him.

“Henry leaned in closer. ‘Dude,’ he said, his voice almost a whisper. ‘I was missing everything.’”

The final book is *kira-kira* by Cynthia Kadhata. This book did win the Newbery Medal and the gold seal on the front of each copy fittingly says “For the Most Distinguished Contribution to Children.” Again written in the first-person, Katie tells us about her life with her hard-working Japanese parents, her brave genius sister Lynne and her young brother Sam. Katie is an accurate and careful narrator, who gives clear details of events and whose observations are small yet powerful. She is

funny and insightful and there is a sense she will make a wonderful adult.

When I look at all three of these books together, I realize they are about love and its ability to make all of us whole. In frequently blunt, never sentimental language, we are introduced to grief and joy and the crucial connections all human beings need. It is books like these that are more than the words and the plot – they are gifts to us all.