



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“The buckets had the colors written on them, but of course the kittens couldn’t read. They had to tell by the colors.

‘It is very easy,’ said Brush.

‘Red is red. Blue is blue,’ said Hush.’

-From Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Color Kittens*

My granddaughter (and daughter) came to stay for a few days last week. Now that she is nineteen months old, books are becoming increasingly important to Maddie. To get ready for their visit, I pulled out some of the children’s books I have been saving since my daughters were young. I also included the two I ordered online: *The Color Kittens*, illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen, and *I Can Fly* by Ruth Krauss, with illustrations by Mary Blair. As a child, I loved both of these Golden Books, and when I got older, I read them to my younger brothers. In fact, when I look at the illustrations in *I Can Fly*, I realize I still appreciate the clear bright colors and wonderful patterns – it makes me happy just looking at them.

Maurice Sendak’s *One was Johnny* is one of the books I put out. This tiny toddler-sized tome was part of a set of three, although I have no idea where the other ones are. My daughter immediately recognized it and was excited to realize it is

actually her old copy. “I taught myself to read with this book,” she told me. Tired of waiting for someone to read it to her, she had set herself down and – having memorized most of it – used it to figure out just how to make words on the page into words she could read. As she began reciting it from memory, my youngest daughter and I were able to join in – some things you never forget.

Maddie was quite taken with *One was Johnny*. I think this was partly because of the size and partly because of the book itself: the simple pictures and satisfying rhymes make it perfect for any young child. By the time she left (taking the book with her), she knew most of the text and could chime in when listening to it.

I Can Fly was also a hit. I could tell because each time I read it to her, she would listen carefully and then say “Again?” when we got to the end. But the biggest surprise was when a friend stopped by and caught sight of it. “I know that book,” she said, and, without looking

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at the words, began reciting: “A bird can fly. So can I. A cow can moo. I can too.”

I was amazed and it made me think about all those early books that had such an impact on me, the ones whose words are there in my head somewhere. I can’t help wondering what kind of impact these books had on my life. Have they shaped me in some way? Does the fact I can recite *’Twas the Night Before Christmas* and *The Little Red Hen* give insight into who I am? And what does it mean that some of my friends share the same book memories?

As a librarian, parent and grandparent, I would say the biggest significance to this is the importance of choosing memorable and appealing books for our children. Interestingly, although there are many, many children’s books published each year, not many of them are truly outstanding and worth owning. Some have good

ideas that aren’t well carried out, some have great illustrations without equally good text, some are too loaded with meaning and message, and some are simply trite. However, every year there are wonderful ones, worth storing in the memories of the next generation of parents and grandparents. Look for them and read them over and over or, as Maddie says:

“Again!”