



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“As far as terms of anatomy go, Patron believes that providing children with materials that give accurate information is far better than leaving them to unscramble ‘half-truths’ and ‘overheard tidbits’ on their own.”

-Shannon Maughan, from “Listservs Buzzing Over Newbery Winner” in *Publishers Weekly (PW)*, February 15, 2007

In case you missed it, the last few weeks have seen much discussion about the latest Newbery winner, *The Higher Power of Lucky* by librarian and writer Susan Patron. It all swirls about the use of a single word: scrotum – in this case, the scrotum of a dog named Roy. There have been articles, op-ed pieces, *PW* pieces and an amazing amount of opinions and comments on various listservs. The *New York Times* article talked of banning and librarians refusing to buy it for their collections and others implied that the author purposely chose the word for its shock value.

My first thought was perhaps the thought of many: Why use a controversial word when you could use a non-controversial one? That is, if Roy is going to be bitten by a rattlesnake, couldn't it be on the leg? Or the nose? Why select a word you know is going to cause trouble, when the book – at least from the pieces I had read then – didn't really seem to be

centered around this event?

But of course at that point I hadn't even read the book, so my only pieces of information were secondhand. So, I read it. And liked it. And understood then why the word was used and wondered, as one writer put it, “...in a world where 10-year-olds have access to images of war and terrorism and hate, is a single biological term really worth getting worked up about?” (From Sara Nelson's “Lacking Cojones,” in *PW* 2007).

The main character of this sweet book is Lucky, who has lost her mother, been deserted by her father, and is being raised by her father's first wife. Her voice is poignant and there is a maturity may come from the fact that the author “...wrote *The Higher Power of Lucky* for the 10-year-old who lives inside me” (*PW* 2007). That is, the language sometimes seems like the simple thoughts of an adult, rather than the complicated ones of a child. And, at times,

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there seems to more self-awareness and ability to express her feelings than the average 10-year-old may have.

Like Lucky, the other characters are memorable and loveable: her friend Lincoln who his mother hopes will some day be president; needy endearing five-year-old Miles; and, the elegant and very French Brigitte, Lucky’s guardian. *The Higher Power of Lucky* is about searching for love and finding it and there is a part of me that can easily identify with all the people living in it.

Whether or not it should have received the prestigious Newbery is another question that has been raised about this book. After reading it, I did wonder if it will be one of the truly great books that children will read forever – that, to my mind, is what makes a book worth singling out. And at this point, who knows? As Kristin McLean says in her incredibly

thorough look at this issue:

“History has also shown that many past Newbery winners who may have not been the most obvious choice when they were picked have subsequently proved their brilliance. Madeline L’Engle’s classic *A Wrinkle in Time*, for example” (<http://pixiestixkidspix.wordpress.com>).

And does it matter? It is a book worth reading for any age and if it hadn’t won the Newbery, I might not have read it. I’m glad I did: It moved me, brought back childhood memories of wandering freely the creeks and fields of Livermore, and left me happy. What more can anyone ask?