



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Indeed, in its sum, this book is not only a book about books, but a book that calls us to books, that reminds us of their singular aesthetic power, their moral energy, their ability to reach us mind, heart, soul, to tell us about the world...”

-Robert Coles, Foreword
to *Inside Picture Books*

One of the classes I’m taking this semester is on children’s literature, for ages 0 to 6 – although I admit I’m not clear on what it means to be zero. Every week we will be reading children’s books and professional resources on the importance of children’s literature. One of these books is Ellen Handler Spitz’ “Inside Picture Books,” which provides one person’s deeply considered opinions of the value of picture books in general, as well as in-depth analyses of many of the books we might see as classics. Her goal, she says in her introduction, is to “set down reflections that are meant to be helpful in choosing, introducing, rendering, and interpreting cultural objects for young children” (page 2).

I have read many picture books in my life, starting when I read to my youngest brother and then on through the childhoods of my own children. In fact, this past week when I picked up our tattered, stained

and possibly chewed copy of “Peter Rabbit”, I was surprised to see my brother’s name written in the front, alongside the words “Christmas 1961.” And I suddenly remembered having that little boy in my lap and turning the shiny pages as I read to him. It was such a strong feeling, as if I were twelve again and he was two.

Spitz tells numerous anecdotes like this about the power of these books in our past and the way in which their stories can affect our perceptions of the world. This idea was reinforced for me again last week when I attended a graduation party. Looking for some common ground, I brought up the subject of picture books. A discussion about Lucretia Hale’s “The Peterkin Papers” (original copyright 1886) immediately ensued and the two people who remembered it laughed and told some of the stories from it as if they had just read it - despite the fact that it

has probably been at least sixty years since they did.

And so, I agree there is power in these childhood stories. And while I may not subscribe to some of the in-depth psychological analysis that Spitz uses as she talks about such books as Sendak’s “In the Night Kitchen” or Hoban’s “Bedtime for Frances,” I can see that being aware of the influence of a child’s picture book is important. And a comment she makes as she talks about the recurring theme of windows in children’s books - that a window can only keep out what is real, not what is unreal - reminded me of lying in bed at night as a child and wanting the curtains open. I remember thinking that if I could see the darkness, I could make sure there was nothing out there to get me.

Spitz also talks about the issues of race, gender, and ethnicity, and how they are

represented in the books we read to our children. Certainly there has been much progress since the days when I read to my brother - there are more books with characters from many cultures. Some authors avoid this issue by using animals, and Spitz makes a wonderful point about this. Citing an article by anthropologist Judith Goldstein, she wonders about the assumption that somehow children can identify with various animals but not with people who don’t look exactly like them. Now, there is an excellent question.