



Delaware poetry: Capturing the delicate nature of parenting

POETRY • By JoANN BALINGIT • April 25, 2010

In rearing children, one walks the tightrope of being too helpful or not helpful enough. "Learning experience" aside, no one wants children to suffer. But in every arena of life, adults must eventually stand back and allow kids to explore the ropes on their own.

Parents, teachers and caregivers invest a lot of energy in teaching children-including when and how to take risks while trying to protect children from harm. It's not easy.

For example, how do you decide how scary is too scary for children? When parents complained that the new film version of Maurice Sendak's classic picture book, "Where the Wild Things Are" was too frightening for kids, the author responded that he would "not tolerate" suggestions that his book, or its film, is too scary. According to a *Newsweek* article, Sendak said of such parents, "I would tell them to go to hell." And he added, "It's not a question that can be answered."

Sendak famously insists that children face real fears every day, and are more sophisticated in their knowledge of good and evil than adults would like to imagine. Fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" embrace childhood fears. The best children's tales help young readers use their intelligence and imagination to cope with fears, and to deal with strong emotions such as anger. Sendak considers Walt Disney's sanitized versions of children's fairy tales to be patronizing to children.

Sendak based the fantastic and wicked monsters of "Where the Wild Things Are" on relatives who visited his family home when he was a child. They spoke practically no English, twisted his cheeks and threatened to eat him up. Sendak and his siblings "were petrified" of these strange foreigners, he says. The children didn't realize that the big scary people were trying to be affectionate.

As poet and novelist Margaret Atwood says in "You Begin," a poem addressed to a child, the world is a scary place, period.

This is the world, which is fuller

and more difficult to learn than I have said.

You are right to smudge it that way

with the red and then

the orange: the world burns.

But children can be just as frightening to adults. In her poem "Against Writing About Children," Erin Belieu, a writing professor at Florida State University, contemplates why "Children/frighten us, other people's and/ our own."

Each child turns

into a problematic ocean, a mirrored

body growing denser and more

difficult to navigate until

sunlight merely bounces

off the surface. They become impossible

to sound. Like us, but even weaker.

Devon Miller-Duggan, a Delaware poet and professor in the University of Delaware's Honors Program, echoes Belieu's trepidation in poems about her own children. In her poem "Rearing the Children," Miller-Duggan suggests that for better or for worse, parents fall back on animal instincts often in caring for their offspring. Are humans necessarily more successful at parenting than the Maine puffins who "bury their nests,/dig out their ripened young,/stuff the yawning beaks with fish,/and then abandon them"?

Miller-Duggan is the author of the collection of poems, "Pinning the Bird to the Wall" (Tres Chicas Books, 2008), in which "Rearing the Children" appears. In another poem from Miller-Duggan's first book, she considers the question of what's too scary for children.

The speaker in "Guernica" seems to agree with Maurice Sendak: "It's not a question that can be answered." In this wild world, every child will have to decide for herself.

GUERNICA

The Britannica lies open to Picasso's entry

Where I've left it and gone on to other work.

My daughter, four or five or six, is stopped

And staring at the quarter-page reprint in greys

Of Guernica. And while I think of how

To say what it's a picture of, she points and says

"There's suffering. There's suffering. There's suffering."

She calmly stares at severed limbs and pleading eyes

For several seconds, then goes off to eat or play.

I make a note and slide it in with her first word, first steps,

First lock of hair. Fifteen years pass and I

Don't need the book to tell me what she saw that day,

Still grateful she moved on and never asked me to explain.

---Devon Miller-Duggan

State Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit will write an column on poetry and First State poets each Sunday during April, which is National Poetry Month. Her chapbook, *Your Heart and How It Works* (2009) is available from Spire Press, spirepress.org. For more, go to <http://joannbalingit.org>.