

The Circus in Children's Literature

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Children are amazed by the acts of the circus. They gape and wonder at the astonishing acts and exciting stunts that are performed right in front of their eyes. The circus provides them with hope that there is more to life than the routines and hardships of everyday life. Their innocent faith and lack of doubt allow them to dream, without hesitation, that they will one day be that dancer on the tightrope or the man on the trapeze. As Hoh and Rough (1990) write in their circus textbook, “The flight of an acrobat, the personality of an elephant, or the antic of a clown is the stuff of dreams, and it is our dreams that define who we are. The circus is one of the few places on earth where we normal human beings can complete the line, ‘I wish it were possible to...’ or ‘I wish I could...’ The circus offers the undeniable truth that ‘It is possible,’ and that ‘I can.’” The circus definitely encourages children to dream. It is an element desired by the hearts of children, an element that fills their fantasies.

One place that children can visit these acts and dreams without actually visiting the circus is in literature. Many writer’s of children’s literature use the circus to accomplish their goals. First, the circus can be used to grab a young readers’ interest and keep them engaged. For instance, there are several easy readers and picture books that are set at the circus. These include *If I Ran the Circus* by Dr. Seuss, *Spot Goes to the Circus* by Eric Hill, *Clifford at the Circus* by Norman Bridwell, *Pippi Goes to the Circus* by Astrid Lindgren, and *Paddington Bear at the Circus* by Michael Bond. Many of these titles are part of series that find the Big Top a pleasurable stop for a story.

Children’s authors also use the circus to illustrate their characters’ imaginations and to help their characters find adventure. For instance, in *Sidewalk Circus* by Paul Fleischman, the main character imagines that the circus is taking place across the street from him on the sidewalk while he waits for the bus. He gets lost in the excitement until the bus comes to pick him up.

The circus also takes hold of the imagination in *Last Night I Dreamed the Circus* by Maya Gottfried. While the young main character is asleep, she dreams that she participates in every act of the circus. Her dreams are shown in beautiful water colored paintings that would astonish any child. One currently popular book that uses the circus to show the child's desire to imagine and dream is *Olivia Saves the Circus*. In this book, Ian Falconer writes about Olivia's class presentation. She is supposed to speak about her vacation. Instead, when Olivia steps to the podium, she tells her classmates about the "day she saved the circus." She says, "But when we got there, all the circus people were sick with ear infections. Luckily I knew how to do everything. I was Olivia the tattooed lady. I drew the pictures on with marker. Then I was Olivia the lion tamer and Olivia the tight-rope walker and I walked on stilts and juggled and was Olivia the clown and rode a unicycle" (Falconer, 2001). Olivia finds it more exciting to take her class on an adventure into her dreams than to tell her classmates a true, boring story. These books show how the circus is an exciting place where children can find adventure, fulfill their dreams, and expand their imaginations.

In still other books, the circus and circus acts are used opposite heavier, more difficult issues to make these issues more bearable for children. For instance, in *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, Gerstein uses an authentic circus act to make the loss of the twin towers less horrific for his readers. In this Caldecott Medal winning book written in 2003, Gerstein tributes both the Twin Towers and Philippe Petit. He tells the story of the courageous Philippe and his tight-rope walk between the unfinished towers in 1974. Gerstein (2003) writes, "If he saw three balls, he had to juggle. If he saw two towers, he had to walk! That's how he was." The book's beautiful, full-page pictures filled with line and color portray the immense height of the towers and the danger of Philippe's risky walk. Gerstein found Philippe's amazing walk

between the towers a good way to convey the loss of the towers without directly talking about the events of 9/11. At the end of the book Gerstein writes, “Now the towers are gone. But in memory, as if imprinted on the sky, the towers are still there. And part of that memory is the joyful morning, August 7, 194, when Philippe Petit walked between them in the air.” The excitement of Philippe’s dreams and courage make the loss of the towers accessible to children.

In another example, a coming of age story written for older children uses the circus to tackle the gripping issues of acceptance and loneliness. In *Ghost Boy* by Iain Lawrence, fourteen-year-old Harold is an albino who is teased and taunted by his classmates. His dad died in World War II, his brother went missing in Vietnam, and his mother has married a new guy that Harold can’t stand. Overwhelmed with the hardships in his life he runs off and joins the circus. He thinks the fantasies and “freaks” of the circus will protect him from the pain of his daily life. As a member of the circus he finds himself consoled and protected by the “freaks,” but at the same time he wants to win over the approval of the beautiful riders and acrobats. When he teaches the elephants to play baseball and wins the acclaim of the “beautiful people,” he realizes that he has turned his back on the love he received from the freaks. He looks to his circus friends for consolation and advice. The Circus Gypsy Magda talks to Harold about his pursuit of fitting in with the riders and acrobats. She asks, “If you think that you are less than them, can you blame them for thinking you are?” (Lawrence, 2002, p.88-89). With the help of Magda and other circus friends, Harold gains confidence and realizes that the only protection he really needs is belief in himself. Here, the author uses the circus to mirror today’s society and assert to the reader that what people think of themselves will dictate how others think of them.

Clearly, the circus has its place in children’s literature. From the big top to the trailers, the dreams and excitement of the circus make it a useful setting for children’s books. Not only

does it spark interest, but it also allows children to delve into their imaginations and even to deal with the tough issues of society and growing up. With the knowledge of children's fascination with the circus, teachers can use aspects of the circus not only in literature, but also to sell children the importance of an education. If teachers make things exciting, allow children to dream, and show them that amazing things ARE possible, children might be a little more willing to come back for more.

References

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