

Title TK

On Not Editing Children

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ONE DAY, MANY YEARS AGO, when she was about nine, my daughter proudly handed me a story she'd written. She liked to write, and was in the habit of scribbling down stories, or parts of stories. She had a jaunty, fresh style.

I don't remember what this story was about (a cat? a bear?) but I do recall I didn't find it particularly captivating, unlike most of her others. This one, whatever it was about, struck me as unremarkable, plodding. No pizzazz.

The reason I remember it at all, is because of how *she* felt about it. She stood watching me eagerly while I read, sighing in a dreamy way, "Can you believe it? Isn't it so beautiful?" I imagine I must have said something non-committal and teacherly, like, "You really love this don't you? What's your favorite part?"

It turned out to be one sentence, which she pointed to, buried in the middle of the page. This was the sentence:

"What could they do; there was nothing to be done."

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"I just can't believe *I* wrote that," she said, shaking her head in bewilderment, after I read it aloud.

I don't remember too much about the conversation that followed (nor who "they" were, or what there was "nothing to be done" about), but recognized, now that she'd brought the sentence to my attention, and kept shaking her head at the amazingness of it, that indeed it did have a kind of grandeur unlike any she'd ever written: it rang ancient tones, like the tolling of a great bell; it was full of portent, perhaps even sorrowful foreboding. In fact, it could have been in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, which she was reading at the time. It was as if, through that one sentence, she had wandered out of the yard of her usual language, and found herself in a different, mysterious, elegant part of town.

In posing the question (minus a question mark) —"What could they do"—it was as if a bank of elders was being consulted; and her reply, speaking as these elders, relayed the somber verdict: "nothing". In this sad exchange, she seemed to be speaking of deep and binding laws, of the inexorability of fate.

Also, it was one of the first times she'd ever ventured to use a semi-colon, and we both agreed that it added to the sentence's allure. She loved semi-colons, she told me, and by way of expressing why, she put up one hand to denote Stop, and with the other hand, waved me to Go. A semi-colon seemed to tell you both

To Watch in Secret

ALEX

Canadian resident of orange and yellow
 With black eyes of friendliness, staring at me—
 Slate-gray necklace of dancing pearls
 You sit in the middle of guardian pink roses
 Waiting for me to approach,
 Deciding if you should fly away
 While the outline of your eyes
 Reflects shining white stones.
 I come upon you and feel what you feel.

He wants to write a pantoum for the Red-legged Kittewake. A letter poem to the Ring-Necked Duck. An “I Wish” poem about his deepest desire for the Peregrine Falcon. When I comment on the fact that nothing today got erased, he smiles, adjusts his glasses, and takes a chance to hold my gaze a few beats longer. Grabbing his backpack, he leaves the same way he arrived. Children like birds most definitely have wings, I decide.

Over the years I’ve learned how kids like to write (all differently; all with an element of fun and surprise) and why they don’t (fear of making a mistake; fear they have nothing to say). I’ve had excellent teachers: Zoe, Sam, Alex, and the brave, shy, outgoing, sensitive, frustrated, defiant, and wildly creative ones who’ve helped me learn what it takes to get out of the way, so they can unleash what they most want and need to say.

Here, at my dining room table, and in the classrooms with California Poets in the Schools where I sport the glossy *Visitor* badge, I’m simply the guide on the side who provides a few tricks for student-poets to climb through the portals of their imaginations. I hold the ladder steady so they can enter the poem no one else in the world can write, except for them. I give them passports then send them on journeys inside themselves and listen to their travels upon their return. And though I don’t tell them this, I know the reason I’m here is to shake things up on the inside

and break them out of their goal oriented, good grade focus for a while.

It’s the last day of school. Mrs. A. has arranged for me to lead a poetry workshop for her sixth graders. She greets me by saying, “I gave them each a doughnut and a cup of juice.” I don’t have time to be scared. I have exactly 50 minutes to get 30 sugared-up sixth graders to fall in love with Pablo Neruda. Today we’re writing question poems. I tell a story about one of Neruda’s earliest memories of finding a toy sheep that someone pushed through a hole in a fence, in his backyard. Left as a gift from one child to another, after losing that gift in a fire, Neruda still looked in the windows of antique and toy stores, in the many cities he traveled to and lived in. I tell them that we have to work at keeping the gifts of magic and curiosity from our childhoods alive. We could spend an hour talking about the meaning of that toy sheep, but the second hand keeps sweeping around its orbit so we continue on to another of Neruda’s loves: questions. I ask whether anyone has ever asked a question that they didn’t want or need an answer for. A few hands shoot up. The rest of them still look lost, a dusting of powdered sugar on their upper lips. I pass around a straw box of numbered poems from the last book Neruda wrote, *The Book of Questions*. I invite them to read out loud the question they took. Mrs. A., my favorite kind of teacher, is first to read:

Why does the hat of night
 fly so full of holes?
 What does old ash say
 when it passes near the fire?

Despite serving doughnuts, Mrs. A. is the kind of teacher the visiting poet dreams of. She doesn’t leave the room upon my arrival. She doesn’t disappear into her computer screen or staple worksheets in the back of the room. Instead she sits down, picks up a pencil and opens a notebook, eager to write along with her students.

“They don’t have to all be stunners like Neruda’s,”

things at once. Coincidentally, I had had a similar association to semi-colons as a child: the period over the comma was like a half-hinged door; it suggested a creaky lock on an old gate that you get to slip through into another world, even though you're not exactly supposed to.

I found it interesting that I had skimmed right over this sentence, buried as it was in otherwise groggy prose. And even if I had noted its beauty, I couldn't possibly have known it stirred such feeling in her. What if I had been critical of it, unwittingly? Or otherwise dismissed it?

Or had sought to actively edit her story, as was a current practice in her school. "It's never too early to revise," the school's writing expert often said, advocating the idea that children as young as three be taught how to edit their drawings. "Children should find a main idea, and cut away everything that doesn't fit that idea. "Snip, snip" the expert explained.

If I, or a teacher, however well-meaning, were to cross out or otherwise dismiss this sentence, wouldn't it be tantamount to cleaning out someone else's room, and throwing out what seemed like junk, only to perhaps find out later that hidden there, had been a tiny ruby, stuck deep in a pocket?

As it turned out, I don't think I said much beyond telling her how intrigued I was by her writing, and discussing with her our mutual love of semi-colons. I might have wanted to say more, but recognized she was involved in an experience of discovery and experimentation with language that was best done alone; she had stumbled into being able to put words together so they evoked unsettling feeling; she had managed to figure out how to create a sense of foreground, background, and gesture to a future, however doomed it was. She had plenty of wealth to survey. I stepped back.

Also, the fact that she remained so surprised by her sentence, suggested that its invention had occurred not through careful planning, or conscious design, but

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through a kind of dreamy intuition. She seemed to regard her having written it as one who finds herself plunked down in the middle of somewhere she'd half set out to find, but once arrived, is not at all sure how she'd gotten there. I was an adult sitting with a child in the mysteries of the creative realm.

I knew my support and appreciation of her was helpful. But was there something more I could offer? I wanted to encourage her to keep going, to enter more deeply.

Maybe I could read something to her? Something that spoke from the same charged realm she'd wandered in to. What text might sound the same mysterious tones? I looked through my shelves.

Remembering the strange first lines of Salman Rushdie's, "Haroun and the Sea of Stories," I sat next to her and read:

There was once, in the country of Alifbay, a sad city, the saddest of cities, a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. It stood by a mournful sea full of glumfish, which were so miserable to eat that they made people belch with melancholy, even though the skies were blue.

She laughed and drew in close. "I don't like that, but I like it," she said. And then she added, "I want to write more, Go away." 🙄