

Straight From the Heart

by Lynne Jonell

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I wasn't sure why the boy approached me after my talk to the fifth graders was over. Or, rather, I wasn't clear on the real reason.

The surface reason was obvious; he wanted to tell me that he had read one of my picture books when he was smaller. And on the surface he looked like just one more child who hoped for attention from the author, and had managed to think of something to say. He seemed a little shy, but he was perfectly courteous.

"It was *Mommy Go Away*," he said. "The one you showed us."

The librarian hovered near, listening.

I smiled and said that was great to hear. He wasn't finished. "It was really good," he said. "I liked it a lot." He gazed at me seriously.

I told him I was glad that he had liked it, and thanked him for telling me. I glanced toward the back of the room where his teacher was organizing his class into a line.

The boy leaned in. "I don't know where it is now. I tried to find it but I couldn't. I'm sorry I don't know where it is."

That was perfectly all right, I assured him. Sometimes I can't find books, either. Not to worry.

"It was really good," he repeated. He did not seem to notice his teacher, waiting with some impatience near the exit. The boy stepped closer. His gaze was earnest, almost imploring. "I really liked it."

Clearly he was trying to share something of importance to him. Equally clearly, I wasn't getting it. And I wasn't likely to.

It's hard to be a child, having no words to truly describe what you are feeling. Adults—well, some of us, anyway—have learned to talk about our feelings, to analyze them, to come up with reasons for the vast tides of emotion that heave in, foaming, and smack us with oceanic power. But kids, not so much. In Charlotte Bronte's magnificent book *Jane Eyre*, a kindly apothecary asks ten-year-old Jane what made her unhappy:

"How much I wished to reply fully to this question! How difficult it was to frame any answer! Children can feel, but they cannot analyze their feelings or express them in words."

Still, what if you are the adult in this situation? What if you are faced with a child who is struggling to communicate, and you just can't understand, no matter how you try?

The boy's class needed to leave, and I had another presentation to give. I did not know the subtext of what he was saying, so I could not respond on that level. But I could acknowledge the importance of what he was trying to say.

I looked at him with full attention. I slowed down my words; I gave them an intensity, an emphasis that reflected his. I spoke in platitudes but I sounded like the Oracle at Delphi. "I am so glad you came to talk to me," I said. "I am very happy that you enjoyed my book when you were little. Thank you so much for telling me."



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ESSAY

A look of relief washed over his face, and he gave a nod of satisfaction. “You’re welcome,” he said, in the manner of a prince bestowing a gift. He walked quickly back to his waiting teacher, and I turned to my next task and forgot about the incident.

But that evening, at dinner, the librarian asked if I remembered the boy and what he had said. I nodded.

“I was listening,” she said, “because I couldn’t believe it. You have to understand about Luke. The whole time I’ve known him, he’s never been like that.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Courteous,” she said earnestly. “Appropriate. He never is. His parents are very wealthy, they spoil him terribly, and he has no social skills whatsoever. He’s always saying something rude, or doing something inappropriate; all the kids hate him; no one will sit by him unless they’re forced.”

“You’re kidding. I never would have guessed it. I thought he was perfectly polite.”

“I know! That’s what was so incredible!”

We finished our dinner, and I went back to my hotel. But I couldn’t stop thinking about this boy. I was under no illusions that the magic was in me. Luke had sat through many other author presentations, and no doubt heard many gifted speakers. But this time there was a connection to a book he had once loved.

In *Mommy Go Away*, the mother shrinks to doll size, and her young son sends her for a ride on his toy boat in the bathtub. The boy experiences what it is like to be big, and the boss, and responsible, and the mother gets a glimpse of how it feels to be small, and bossed, and dependent. This is a book for a child who feels powerless, and this was a book that had spoken to Luke.

Every adult who reads to a child has seen what happens when a book speaks. For a time, the book becomes the child’s beloved friend. It is asked for repeatedly, and learned by heart, and may God help you if you skip so much as a word or inflection when you read it aloud for the thirty-ninth time in a week. But books do more than speak to a child. I have come to believe that children use books to speak to us.

If you want to understand a child’s deepest emotions, take a look at the books they never tire of hearing, that are carted around with them everywhere, that are hidden in their backpacks on the first day of school. These are the books that communicate to a child. And these are the books that help a child say something to us. This is who I am, the book says for them. This is what I fear. This is what I long for. This is my great hope.

Those of us who spend our lives in the effort to put books in the hands of children—those of us in publishing, teaching, bookselling, library sciences—rarely see the full results of our labor. It isn’t often we are allowed inside the heart and mind of a child, to see what is written there. But sometimes we are given a little clue.

What was Luke trying to tell me when he came up after my talk? I think I know, now. He was trying to say that a book I had written had been important to him. It had given him a voice and a measure of personal empowerment at a time when he needed it. It had helped him feel good about himself in a way he couldn’t articulate, but could still remember. There was a personal connection between us—he felt that I had made a book just for him, and therefore he was sure he could trust me. So Luke dropped his rudeness, his pose, his armor; and he tried, with all the eloquence at his command, to thank me from his heart.

A gift from a prince, indeed.