

Sassy Is as Sassy Does

Speeches are a little like novels. The ideas spring from magical places, motivated by real events, real movements, real discoveries. And this is the way that it always is for me. I have taught Characterization as a workshop for several years and have stumbled across an idea that I have never had a chance to follow inside the workshop, where we are working on the how-to of characterization.

But it has fascinated me, teasing the edges of my mind. To put it succinctly, every year, after I asked the workshop participants to name their favorite characters in literature I ask them what traits those favorite characters shared.

And, over time, what I discovered was that it almost didn't matter what sex a favorite character was or what genre, what age, or what cultural background, almost always the answer was that characters are all, well, sassy. Yes, sassy. There was Alice or Madeline, Maniac or Weasel, Dorothy or Huckleberry or Sarah.

And not only in novels, writers felt the same about picture book favorites: Ping or the Cat in the Hat or the Grinch or Lily of *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse* or Bootsie Barker from *Bootsie Barker Bites* fame. What do they share? They are, well, sassy.

Was this a simple discovery, I wondered? A kind of caption for the cartoon? Or was there something to understand, in order to understand the very power of the novel—and sometimes the picture book itself. Something writers should know, understand, in order to choose what they want to write about, and, as important, how!

To even begin to understand is to understand there is more than one kind of sassy, so let's think sassy for a minute.

In the Caldecott winner *Officer Buckle and Gloria* Officer Buckle, who goes into the schools to introduce good safety tips to the children, keeps boring children, until the department gets the police dog, Gloria. Now, unknown to him, every time Office Buckle gives a tip, like "don't sit on a tack," or "don't spill anything," or "don't go swimming during an electrical storm," Gloria acts the tip out behind his back, jumping into the air, slipping onto her head, and looking like her tail was put into an electrical socket.

Gloria is "sassy," and the kids cheer it! Both the kids in the book, and the kids reading it. When Officer Buckle finally finds out—by watching on a TV show—that Gloria has been mocking him, it almost ruins their friendship—but not in the end.

In the end, even Office Buckle appreciates "sassy."

Gloria the dog does "sassy" without words, but Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* does it with words. We know she is brave all through the book when she turns alternately into a

ceiling-pushing giant to a water-escaping midget. She isn't afraid to try a new cookie or a mushroom, and she isn't afraid to go to a tea party with a rabbit and exchange frustrating repartee, but she gets downright sassy when she stands up to the King and Queen of Hearts during the trial, turning her back on the king's rules and arguing with him to boot!

Some characters, like Alice, just plain begin sassy. Take Ramona in Beverly Cleary's *Ramona Quimby*. The very first day of school, and at the very start of the book, the boys on the bus are kicking seats. The bus driver says to a baseball-capped boy, "As long as I am riding shotgun on this bus, there will be no kicking seats."

Ramona loves that and is busily ignoring the seat-kickers, busily imagining herself riding shotgun on a stagecoach out of town, when she realizes her new eraser is not there. She must have dropped it. Did someone pick it up?

When she asks the boy with the baseball cap if he's found it, the same one doing the kicking, he jerks down his visor, grins, and says, "Nope."

That grin was too much for Ramona. "Liar!" she says with her most ferocious glare, and faces front once more, angry at the loss of her new eraser, angry with herself for dropping it so the boy could find it.

"Purple cootie," she thought and hoped the cafeteria would serve him "fish portions and canned green beans with the strings left on. And apple wedges, the soft mushy kind with tough skins, for dessert."

Now, a game of toss the eraser begins, and she yells "Yard apes!" her name for the sort of boys who always got the best balls, who were always first on the playground, and who chased their soccer balls through other people's hopscotch games. She saw her pink eraser fly back into Danny's hands." 'Yard apes!' she called out."

Sassy . . . and we love it—and Ramona Quimby—right from the start.

And Aunt Chip from *Aunt Chip and the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair* by Patricia Polacco, like Alice, isn't sassy at first. Not until the whole town chooses TV over books!

She just stores sass up while the times are a boiling, a readying themselves for her asserting herself.

In *Christina Katerina and the Time She Quit the Family*, Christina is playing in her room when her brother crashes in with his laser beams and a friend, creating a ruckus and a mess. Her mother follows, running in to say, "Christina, what a mess," followed by Father who says, "Christina, what have you done? You can't just do what you want when you are part of a family." And Christina Katerina says, "Then I quit the family."

And it is not surprising that she and Ramona and Alice and nearly all the sassy heroines and heroes, no matter what particular kind of sass they have, have an anger or frustration in them. Not surprising at all. If everything was hunky-dory, maybe they wouldn't be so sassy. If everything was hunky-dory, maybe there wouldn't be a story.

Oh, I know, there are characters, like Alice, who are just aching to explore their universe without any particular reason except that it is a lazy day, and she discovers a rabbit hole. But the more I look at sassy, the more I can see that chances are good, that in most novels and picture books our heroine or hero is fighting something: fighting parents or authority figures or peers that are just too big to defeat, fighting a situation that may be totally or partially out of their control, fighting fate where circumstances just seem to conspire against them.

They could shout: That's not fair!

In *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, Gilly is being driven to her fourth foster home in as many years and has been asked to be "nice!" Gilly sticks her bubble gum under the handle of the car and thinks. "That cans it. At least nobody had accused Mr. or Mrs. Nevins, her most recent foster parents, of being 'nice.' Mrs. Richmond, the one with the bad nerves had been 'nice.' The Newman family, who couldn't keep a five-year-old who wet her bed, had been 'nice.'

"Well. I'm eleven now, folks, and in case you haven't heard, I don't wet my bed anymore. But I'm not nice. I am brilliant. I am famous across this entire country. Nobody wants to tangle with the great Galadriel Hopkins. I'm too clever and too hard to manage. Gruesome Gilly, they call me. She leaned back comfortable. Here I come, Maime baby, ready or not!"

What sass! And the reader can see right through it. "It isn't fair," we say. "Yard dogs!" we say.

Sass is that anger or frustration or emptiness just leaking out.

And isn't it strange that in the real world you never hear one child tell another child he is sassy. Out in the big world, if a principal is calling someone sassy, or a parent, or the shopkeeper on the corner, it is a judgment, and slightly condescending. Sometimes final. "That child is just plain sassy!" Sometimes there is an ounce of hope: We'd better do something about him or her. Fix him or her.

When it comes to books, though, sassy is a term tinged with bemusement. The proclaimer is smiling as he or she says: Alice in the Queen of Hearts scene is just plain sassy. And Maniac Magee, when he stands up to a whole auditorium, and leaves that auditorium and home? Why, now there's a sassy character. And the truth is, we're glad. Maybe because we are usually rooting for the sassy character in the book. Why?

Maybe, for one reason, in real life the troublesome kid is in our face. Is disrupting our shopping. Is disrupting our table. Or our neighbor's. If I run across an intern or editorial assistant that is sassy—I might call it having an attitude. I just haven't got time for it in the rush of publishing. But I—we—don't mind attitude in a book.

Maybe in a book we can see that there is more than meets the eye. We have more perspective—the writer has given us that—and we can see, as Aristotle said all those years ago, the best heroes and heroines are characters that are mostly good. He or she is on the way, making his or her way against a passel of adults and institutions that are not always child friendly, but the characters are mostly good.

We are certain Alice has a good heart, certain that Maniac is a good kid, certain that Gloria is a good dog, certain that Ramona is a good little girl. We see right through the sassiness to a child or dog or character that is hurting in some way. Or in a spot where, like the porcupine quills on a porcupine who has been threatened by a fox, the quills pop out.

And just as we don't like the fox cornering the porcupine, we don't like the world cornering our hero or heroine. We sympathize, and we wonder: Will that little ego survive? The sass is one small strike against a bewildering universe.

In books, we don't like bullies, and we are indiscriminate about who those bullies may be.

The bullies could be the Queen of Hearts, or a boy with a baseball cap, the weather, or outside forces that add up to an enemy. It could be the hero or heroine's own perception of the world as a world that requires porcupine quills that is the enemy, but that can be real, too. Very real.

I said there were different kinds of sassy in books. In the Harry Potter books, Harry himself isn't always sassy; sometimes he's mostly hapless, kind of naïve, unaware. But the author herself is sassy. J. K. Rowling has an attitude, and that sassy tone is what allows the Potter books to join the Dahl books in that slightly wicked niche that allows children to give adults a run for their money and smile at the same time.

And this energy, this quest for fairness, for equilibrium, is, after all, the primary gas for a novel. And this is what the author needs to know. A novel or book is not a "still life." It is a living, moving story, a character moving from here to there. The heroine or hero is struggling for life, and if they need to sass one part of the universe or another, that's as it should be, isn't it? Maybe they have to sass in order to breathe.

In this year's Newbery winner, *Holes*, Stanley Yelnats is anything but sassy at first. Louis Sachar, the author, has created one of the most memorable "victims" in recent children's literature. Like Rowling, Sachar's whole tone is sassy, but that is where the similarity ends. In a way, we are waiting for Stanley to catch up in the attitude department: "Wake up, Stanley," the author seems to be saying.

An author has to begin somewhere. The reason a book, and particularly a novel, is not a still life is because it begins when or where something is not right. Something is so not right that we sense that all's not right with the universe itself! And it doesn't matter if it is peopled with adults who are telling the child what is right and what is wrong. Maybe those adults don't understand themselves.

Maybe it is up to the child, as fragile and frail as the child might be, to set off into the unknown, to make things right. For himself or herself. Maybe for his place in the family or village, but most assuredly, because we are convinced this is important, crucial: His or her very act of trying will convince us that all's right with the universe. It is that trying, that standing up, that small voice sassing the universe that assures us.

No matter what genre—fantasy, historical fiction, or humor— a children's book allows a more optimistic trip. A trip that confirms that there is a place for "right" in the world, and if you dare to sass the universe when "right" is at stake, the universe will listen.

We are not always so certain in adult books.

How does an author get his or her character from one place to the next place: by moving along a path that tests the character. A character cannot become what it can be without bumping into stuff and dealing with it. Or not dealing with it. It is probably why authors begin so many books by reducing the hero or heroine to an orphan, or a child with only one parent, or foster child. Think Moses. Or Maniac. Story needs to begin somewhere to go somewhere.

I am sometimes profoundly touched by the archetypes and symbols that emerge in books; frequently, I am convinced that the author isn't even aware of them.

Like a lot of sophomores, I fell in love with existentialism. I like the idea that we start out in an objective world full of objects like our school, our family, our books, our institutions, all of them telling us what to do, but when we cross the membrane into nothingness—a word that always bothered me as a sophomore—we cross into a free-floating world where, unsupported by family or institutions, we must make our own choices. And if we cross over, we must be responsible because we are part of this universe. And it matters. One free-floating choice-maker, one sassy, free-floating choice-maker, matters.

And if your heart is swelling as I say that, that is the goal and the task of the novelist. Of the writer. We are dealing with matters of the universe in writing. We are not here to be writing a sweet little piece that is "kind of like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," or "kind of like *The Clown of God*." Or "kind of like" anything else.

These books have been written. We don't need another one like them. The universe and the reader, sensing this, may not listen.

Nor a publisher.

I cannot think of a single character that people have loved over the years, who in addition to being sassy, was not set in play in an original story. A vastly original story. Sent down a rabbit hole, or into Kansas fields beyond the poppies, or sent into an inner city that was ripe for a Robin Hood hoopster, or sent out into a desert of holes, or sent to a wizard's school where they play Quiddich with broomsticks.

Let us not undervalue the importance of originality in writing.

A sassy character, as appealing as he or she is, needs a sassy universe. A universe so original that it is willing and able to speak back to the hero or heroine.

A writer needs to get the reader's attention. And will use what he or she needs to get that attention. The truth is, the author herself or himself is more apt to care if he or she has created a new world. Something fresh. A terrain that is either really new or looked on as if it were new.

And more than that, the writer needs to look not only at the world itself, which may well be situated just down the block, but which becomes original in the hands of the author, but needs to look at the world he or she has created with originality of expression.

"Yard apes! Purple cooties!" mumbled Ramona!

When I was writing this piece, I began to understand that "attitude" must come from the writer. The writer him or herself needs to be sassy. Has to stand up.

A book is seldom begun in a day. A book—whether it is *Officer Buckle and Gloria* or *Holes* or *No Condition Is Permanent*—is long in the head and heart before it is on the page.

A book asks to be original because only then will the readers fully believe that this is a new experience, someone and something to pay attention to. A character begins somewhere, with an ache, with a need, with a void, but with potential, a potential that the reader can see even if the hero or heroine cannot. And the character flows through event, hopefully original event, that acts as adversary, and that will ask the character to rise to it.

Flowing in that arc that grows more intense and more intense, sometimes winning and sometimes losing, the character who has become story, will stand up. Because she must. Because he or she is standing in for us. And, if the author does it right, the character will do it with personality, and personhood, and plenty of sass!

As a writer, you may have to risk scraping the soul, because that is where the original stuff is, where the passion that drives character and story is. You can't skim the surface to discover and write a good book. To sass the universe. Stand up. Speak out. We're listening.