

## For the very young

**NOTE: Some of these picture books do not let themselves easily be treated with the “synopsis” and “Potential” formula.**

### **SOMETHING FROM NOTHING**

By Phoebe Gilman

Published by Scholastic Canada, 1992

#### **Synopsis**

Two stories in one, one “up” with text, and one “down” without text. As boy Joseph’s clothes wear out, his clever tailor grandfather saves what he can and transform the “big” to something valuable “little.” Until nothing is left...but the story of it. But “down” the discarded snippets find new uses.

#### **Potential**

We live in an age of discards. At one time the term “planned obsolescence” was used to descry how manufacturers of (say appliances and cars), built products that would wear out soon so people would be forced to keep buying. We live in a “throwaway society,” so others said. One “fixer” friend of Adrian would walk along the streets in his neighbourhood on garbage pickup days after his retirement, and find all kinds of discards he fixed up and sold or gave away.

The tide has been turning on this, with many municipalities now demanding that people put recyclables in separate bags or containers.

For Christians this recycling trend is rooted in the notion of Creation, as understanding that human beings have been set in a “garden” they did no create themselves, but were given to enjoy and use. We are to live lives of gratitude for this. And “use” does not mean “exploit” without limits. We are to be stewards.

This book is a fine tool for exploring these truths with our children.

## **THE CARROT SEED**

Text by Ruth Krauss, pictures by Crockett Johnson.

Originally published in 1945.

### **Synopsis**

A little boy sows a carrot seed. His family doesn't think his work will amount to anything, but the boy waits, in faith, for the carrot to come up. And it does.

### **Potential**

What is faith? Assent to doctrines? Certain behaviours? While those two human aspects may have their place, at heart faith is a matter of trust, the Christian's trust in the God who loves us unconditionally, who created a universe governed by laws (of nature – a carrot seeds produces a carrot, not an onion), and who will turn the bad to good. This little gem expresses that very well. If parents already exhibit that trust in God in how they talk and in what they do, then reading this small tale to their children is confirmation of that trust. The doctrine of Creation is relevant here as well. Of course there is a science (carrot genes) and a technology (sow and water) to growing carrots, but Christians believe that we cannot live properly without God's providence and faithfulness shown in the seasons and in the growing of things. It also behooves us to always be thankful to God for the food He provides. And why is the big brother more sure than the parents? Youthful optimism verses adult caution?

## **OWL MOON**

By Jane Yolen, illustrated by John Schoenherr

Published by Philomel Books, 1987

### **Synopsis**

The narrative is simple. A Dad and his child go walking one winter night in search of a Great Horned Owl. After much effort they find him.

### **Potential**

But it's the way the search is described, in words and pictures that makes this book important. At first the noises of ordinary life go with them - train and dog. But then the quiet takes over, needed for "If you go owling you have to be quiet." Pa knows what to do, and when and how to call. But it takes persistence when the owl isn't found right away. And it's tough to be persistent when its night, the woods are dark with black trees, and bitterly cold. But the moon remains a guide in the dark. And finally the owl is discovered, and the bird lets himself be seen. And only then can Pa and the child "talk, I could even laugh out loud." What is needed to go owling is hope, "the kind of hope that flies on silent wings under a shining owl moon."

We'd be tempted to use this story as allegory. God is not so visibly a presence. Believers walk in trust, guided by the light (of Scripture) in full expectation that they will meet God. Sometimes God seems not present, and the world seems a cold place. But parents and other believers show the way to their children with their walk in hope that God will be found.

## **THE RAINBOW FISH**

by Marcus Pfister, translation by J. Alison James

Published by North-South Books, 1992

### **Synopsis**

The story of a rainbow fish covered with scales so beautiful it made it the most beautiful fish in the ocean. Other fish admire his beauty, but when they invite him to play the beautiful fish refuses. One fish asks for one tiny scale, but the rainbow fish refuses. After that no fish wants to bother with him and he grows lonely. But then the octopus tells him to share his scales with others. He does, and the rainbow fish becomes part of the fish community.

### **Potential**

A book begging for links with gospel verses, stories and parables. Here are some, all from the Gospel of Luke:

Luke 6:38; 8: 18; 9:46-48; parable of the Good Samaritan (chapter 10); 11:5-8; 12: 13-32; 14:28-33; 18:18-27.

## **RED LEAF, YELLOW LEAF**

By Lois Ehlert

Published by Harcourt Brace Yovanovitch, 1991

Simple text with wonderful big colourful illustrations. The narrator loves the tree in all seasons, with each season having its own charm. For Christians this book may be a reminder that all plants and animal are gifts come from God, and Creation is one term that expresses it.

The back pages contain much scientific information. Parents will decide how much is suitable for their children.

## **PICTURE A TREE**

Barbara Reid.

Published by Scholastic Canada (Northwinds Press) in 2011.

In magnificent illustrations (using Plasticine, the author/illustrator's great art form), we come to see a tree in a variety of ways. In seasons. As objects of play. As art. As home, and road, and umbrella, etc. To see a tree properly, so the author seems to suggest, we need imagination.

We live in an age that seems to reduce a tree to its biology (a station on the track of evolution), or its economic value (how much money can we make with it). Barbara Reid lets us see trees a component of a complex universe over which human beings have dominion (Gen 1:26), meaning both using it for the enhancement of human life and responsibility towards its preservation as it is given to us not made by us.

For older children this book could be a door into discussing how all parts of the natural environment has many aspects. For instance, trees may be studied as chemistry; as physics; as biology; it has economic value as lumber; it provides beauty (e.g. in gardens and parks; becomes object of play on picnics, is used in liturgies [crosses and altars], has histories [Robin Hood, Ukrainian partisans in WW II] and becomes a character in some literature, etc.

## **WHEREVER YOU ARE: MY LOVE WILL FIND YOU**

By Nancy Tillman,

Published by Feiwel and Friends, 2010.

This one of those books that doesn't let itself be dealt with via "synopsis" and "potential." It should be simply read aloud, with perhaps a question at the end: Who is the "I" who "wanted you more than you will ever know?" Many children will respond with "Mom" or "Dad". The dedication mentions "Daddy, whose love always finds me, wherever I am." And notice how the illustrations place the boy in some of what we would consider dangerous places with dangerous companions.

But who else has this persistence? Psalm 139 gives special expression to what this book points to, especially in the rendition of Eugene H. Peterson. Here is one bit from that, and perhaps it inspired this book.

*"Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit?*

*To be out of your sight?*

*If I climb to the sky, you're there!*

*If I go underground, you're there!*

*If I flew on morning's wings*

*To the far western horizon,*

*You'll find me in a minute –*

*You're already there waiting!"*

Sometimes the Bible (and some Psalms) portrays God as a judge who will deal with disobedience and rebellion, a rather stern God. But this book stresses the God of love.

## **JUBILEE**

Text by Ellen Yeomans, illustrations by Tim Ladwig

Published by Eerdmans, 2004.

This is a book of joy, expressed in language and illustrations. It could also have been called “Thanksgiving” of course. The tradition of thanksgiving in both Canada and the US has its origins in Christian folks who realized that every Fall harvest was not just the product of their hard work. Soil, sun and rain had contributed mightily, and these were gifts of God.

The title “Jubilee” adds an extra dimension to this book. Jubilee is a Bible term (Leviticus chapter 25). You may want to read that chapter with your children. In it God tells the people of Israel that every 50<sup>th</sup> year they must not plant and sew, and eat and drink only what they have produced before. In this way their attention will be on the Creator who provides, according to his promises, and not just on their own hard work and cleverness. “The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is therein.”

The earth. Not just the little bit on which most human being lives. That gets expressed in the multi-racial and multi-cultural illustrations. And also in the very first pages, when readers are encouraged to “take the back roads and back woods...” for everyone is welcome, the rich and the poor. And will life on earth after Jesus returns be something like what this book portrays?

## **THE DOT, ISH, SKY COLOR**

By Peter H. Reynolds      Candlewick Press, 2003, 2004, 2012.

### **The Dot: Synopsis**

Vashti feels herself a failure for she cannot draw. After art class her paper is empty. But then her teacher looks at the white page and tells her that she has produced “A polar bear in a snow storm.” But she entices Vashti to put a dot on the white paper, and from there things develop, to the point that Vashti fills a wall with her art. And...gets another student on the road to creation.

#### **Potential**

This one is one little gem. Vashti feels utterly worthless about her inability to draw. But the teacher knows: every human being is born with gifts. Perhaps Vashti cannot draw, but she can put dots on paper. In the eyes of the teacher (and God), all human beings are worthy. Moreover, Creation did not stop after “six days.” God created human beings in his image, which includes with creative powers to develop what He gave them as starters. But with power comes responsibility, as Vashti discovers. When faced with a student just like she was, she knows how to help. We were reminded of the ninth commandment which negatively asks of us that we do not bear false witness against our neighbour. Positively that commandment charges us to seek the welfare of our neighbor, promote his or her good name. And therefore nurture his or her gifts when we can. That responsibility lies at the heart of being a parent!

### **Ish: Synopsis**

Ramon loves to draw, and he draws all the time and everywhere. But when his brother Leon ridicules his efforts, Ramon loses courage, and he keeps crumpling up his efforts. But then he discovers that his sister has un-crumpled them, and hung them on her bedroom wall.

#### **Potential**

Art is not about making photographic reproductions of things like vases, but it is expressing meaning. That is, each living thing and item should be seen in relationships (as in -ish). Human beings, created in God’s image, are charged to continue the creative process (and they have!). Moreover, we are to encourage each other in being creators, as Ramon’s sister does. It might be fun to share a book of art with your children after having digested ISH. Can they see how other artists have tried to portray their subjects? Compare, for instance, a Vermeer portrait (more photographic) with Picasso (more abstract).

### **Sky Color: Synopsis**

This time Marisol is the artist. When her class plans to make a large mural, she volunteers to paint the sky. Problem: she doesn’t have the blue she wants, the colour everyone thinks of for a sky. But then she looks at the sky, and comes to see that it isn’t just blue.

#### **Potential**

A third attempt by the author to have children (and parents!) see the world with imagination. While the earth is also full of terrors (earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados, etc.) it is also filled with the glory of God, evident in variety and beauty.

## THE LITTLE ISLAND

Margaret Wise Brown and Leonard Wisegard.

First published in 1946. Caldecott Medal winner in 1947.

For small children and wise adults.

### Synopsis

A seemingly simple story about something we'd normally not think about as spectacular. After all, Canada alone has thousands, if not tens of thousands of little islands, off its three coasts as well as inside its thousands of lakes.

### Potential

But this treatment makes this little island shine.

Connections make it so.

1. The island is portrayed in its four seasons.
2. The island is symbol for the whole earth. For it houses a variety of plants and animals just as our whole planet does. (And the shadow of mankind who uses it for its pleasure, as God promised the garden to Adam and Eve for their pleasure.)
3. As a Christian my thoughts were drawn to the biblical story of Creation (especially Genesis 1). Not creation as description of origins and beginnings. But creation as the world into which human beings are born. For no human being made the earth and all its creatures, stars and galaxies. On the day each one of us is born we find ourselves in a cosmos already present, given, provided. For instance, with parents we didn't choose, an extended family we didn't shape, a culture (human activities) with a long history: neighbourhoods, roads, libraries, fire fighters, police officers, governments, schools, playgrounds, etc., all for our eventual use. But we as babies are also gifts to the world. We enrich the lives of parents who love us, grandparents, aunts and uncles. The state has a new citizen, industry a new consumer, before too long schools have a new student, book publishers a new reader.
4. Life also encounters storms. While the book doesn't mention it, storms can do much damage, and even wash away land (like little islands). Human lives encounter storms.
5. The kitten sees only the island and not its connectedness with the whole earth. It cannot see it for it cannot probe the depths of the sea, as a fish can. So it must believe the fish. Living on earth requires faith, even when doing science.

## **A HOUSE IS A HOUSE FOR ME**

Text by Mary Ann Hoberman, illustrated by Betty Fraser.

A Puffin book, originally published in 1978.

This book is a special favourite of Adrian. He often used to give workshops and other presentations for elementary school teachers in both Canada and the US, and would often read it aloud. It never failed to delight his audiences.

Adrian says: "The language is rich, and so are the illustrations. But I prized most of all the comprehensiveness of seeing "house" everywhere. Years ago Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann persuaded me that for an understanding of both Scriptures and the Christian life we (Christian) need to exercise our imagination. God is not visible in the way that a friend is. Some theologians have recently argued that God is hidden, but easily found by those who go looking for him. That looking for God depends on imagination.

The book invites that use by its last few lines.

"Each creature [*aha, creature, not just animals or fruit*] that's known has a house of its own,  
And the earth is a house for us all."

I would expect that many Christian parents who have a sense of justice honed by sermons and Christian writings, will relish the sentence as a door into discussion."

## **A BABY SISTER FOR FRANCES**

By Russell Hoban, pictures by Lillian Hoban

Published by HarperTrophy, 1964 (1992)

### **Synopsis**

A new baby has arrived, named Gloria. But older sister Frances isn't thrilled. She is no longer the only focus of her parents' attention. She decides to let her parents know, in the end by running away. But not too far away, so she will know how sad her parents will be. When she learns that they miss her, she decides to rejoin the family.

### **Potential**

The Frances books have been available now for 50 years, three generations, a testimony to relevance in thinking about family life. Perhaps the appeal of this book resides in the contrast between the dramatic event - a new baby in the family, often upsetting to a thus far only child - , and the understated language that describes how family members cope and adjust. But also crucial: the actions and reactions float on a river of love. That is what Frances discovers: her fear that parental love has now shifted to the new baby proves entirely unfounded. Love has no quantifiable limit.

And could it be true that in this story the life of faith is mirrored? All kinds of things happen in human life, upsetting things, events that make one doubt the presence and love of God.

Two examples. In 1 Kings 19 we meet an utterly discouraged prophet Elijah. He has risked life and limb for Yahweh, and has demonstrated the power of Yahweh over the idols King Ahab and Queen Jezebel prefer. But instead of honouring Elijah for his persistent faith, Jezebel is determined to kill him. Elijah flees into the wilderness and sighs, "It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (4). And when the Lord asks him, "What are you doing here?" he answers, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (9-10). But then God shows him that all is not lost.

And many of the psalms contain this contrast of the psalmist almost losing hope, but out of despair crying to God who answers. Psalm 40 is especially worth reading with that in mind. Scripture is full of this message: There is no end to the love of God. One can trust that his presence will remain even in upsetting circumstances.

## **BREAD AND JAM FOR FRANCES**

By Russell Hoban, Pictures by Lillian Hoban

Published by HarperCollins, 1964 (1992).

### **Synopsis**

Frances doesn't like a soft-boiled egg for breakfast, for it slides off her spoon. She doesn't like fried eggs either, and all kinds of food. She prefers bread and jam. Also for lunch at school. Mom and Dad have oodles of patience, and they let Frances have her wish. Bread and jam for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Until Frances runs out of patience with this invariable diet.

### **Potential**

(First a personal story. Adrian has six children. This book was a staple in his family when the children were growing up. Johanna, his stay-at-home wife, tried to make all meals interesting and varied, including the school lunches often including some small surprise, and sometimes a little personal note. Perhaps this book was her inspiration. And our children, now all married and parents themselves, still remember: "...and she made [the various food stuffs] come out even.")

This book, too, shows parents as providers of steady, seemingly unspectacular, love, understanding, patience, and forbearance. Giving Frances space and room to discover the truth for herself.

In all this they mirror the love and patience of God, who has given human beings free will and room to explore. As many scholars have taught us, the early Christians wanted a quick fulfillment of the promise of the return of Christ, and some were disappointed that it didn't seem to come within their lifetime. To that one epistle writer observes: "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). The same thought is captured in Hebrews chapter 11, that famous chapter about the "heroes of faith": "Yet all these [from Abel to the contemporary martyrs], though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, *apart from us* [our emphasis] be made perfect" (11:39). The Old Testament folks also knew about God's patience with their own often erratic behavior. Psalm 78 gives expression to it.

*How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! BUT, He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid; (Psalm 78: 40 and 53).*

## **FROG AND TOAD ARE FRIENDS**

By Arnold Lobel

Published by Scholastic (1970).

### **Synopsis**

Five stories about two friends who like each other a lot. In each of the five circumstances they are sad when their friend is sad, and try to think of ways that will make them un-sad.

### **Potential**

Yet another old book that has stood the test of time. Friendship between young children can be difficult. Envious of each other's toys. Angry when one thinks the other gets a better deal (food, toys, time).

This book, so gentle, may help children look at their own friendships, and keep Frog and Toad in mind if they run into friendship trouble. Frog and Toad take turns sensing the others' needs and finding ways to serve those needs. But that doesn't preclude difficult circumstances. In the fourth story Frog sides with other to laugh when Toad looks funny in his bathing suit. A tough moment for Toad.

Human relationships, family, friends, acquaintances, even casual encounters ("neighbours") do not always proceed smoothly. We often forget that we are all equal in God's eyes, and therefore owe each other room and respect. Moreover, as Jesus teaches in the parable of "The Good Samaritan," we owe others springing into action when their needs are placed on our path. This book is such a nice instrument for such teaching.

## LEO THE LATE BLOOMER

By Robert Kraus, pictures by Jose Aruego

Published by Prentice-Hall, 1971.

### Synopsis

Leo isn't as quick as others to master speaking, reading, writing, drawing, etc. Father is worried, but on the advice of Mother doesn't watch, for "a watched bloomer doesn't bloom." She is right – Leo will bloom, in time.

### Potential

Another one of those already old books, a classic. This book isn't really about Leo. Instead it's about all those who think they know exactly how others should be and should live. Human beings have this tendency to judge others against the standard they set for themselves, a tendency Jesus warns us against in his "Do not judge, so you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matthew 7:1-2) That tendency gets intensified when we find other people who have the same standards, as some of the illustrations show! Then we may collectively turn on those who do not live up to those standards, push them to the fringes, even bully them sometimes.

As for Leo, he is beloved by his parents, late bloomer or not. As God loves us all, slow, quick, smart, not so smart, rich or poor.

Time perhaps for the little ones to learn the "Jesus loves me" children's song.

Jesus loves me! This I know. For the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to him belong; They are weak, but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! For the Bible tells me so.

### And also:

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world

Whether you're rich or whether you're poor  
It matters not to Him  
He remembers where you're going  
Not where you've been

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world

If your heart is troubled  
Don't worry, don't you fret  
He knows that you have heard His call  
And he won't forget

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world

All around the world tonight  
His children rest assured  
That He will watch and He will keep us  
Safe and secure

Jesus loves the little children  
All the children of the world  
Black and yellow, red and white  
They're all precious in His sight  
Jesus loves the little children of the world\

## **WHEN I WAS YOUNG IN THE MOUNTAINS**

By Cynthia Rylant

Illustrated by Diane Goode

Published by E.P. Dutton, 1982

### **Synopsis**

A sort of song, with each stanza beginning with, "When I was young in the mountains." And then follows a recall of some aspect of the author's living, all having to do with family and community. Life then (in West Virginia) was hard. No running water, indoor toilet, supermarket, central heating, etc. Bit lots of family and communal love, also through church.

### **Potential**

Was she raised by her grandparents and not by her parents? Had something happened to the parents? Was life then also dangerous (coal mining was, and still is, often a dangerous profession)? What would that be like for children, being raised by grandparents?

The last page is interesting. Did the author as adult then go to the ocean and the desert? So were the mountains ultimately not enough? But if that is true, does that last page also (subtly) indicate that in the mountains she experienced true home, a home she had found nowhere else? Home, community church: three vital aspects of human life for Christians. Not always achieved, but almost always longed for.

## **MY GREAT-AUNT ARIZONA**

By Gloria Houston, illustrated by Susa Condie Lamb

Published by HarperCollins, 1992

### **Synopsis**

Apparently based on the life of a real person, this story follows the life of a little girl who becomes a teacher of many generations. She always taught her students more than mere reading and numbers, but she taught them “about the faraway places they would visit someday.”

### **Potential**

This book might be read in tandem with *More Than Anything Else*, as both stress the importance of education, not only practical matters (the three Rs of reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic), but the imagination which helps us cope with new things in life. Moreover, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has argued so vividly in his books, imagination enables us to keep alive the notion of a better way (of the Kingdom of God), as we live in earthly kingdoms. In fact, he says somewhere, that Christians are fluent in two languages. One is the language of our daily life, in which we live together with all people, Christians or not. But that is our second language. Our first is the language of the Bible, that sees through and beyond our daily circumstances, and sees a larger and better world. It is the language of biblical prophets. It is the language of Dr. Martin Luther King, of South-African former president Nelson Mandela, and of all those who tell us that we need not be content with current circumstances. As those two in particular are persons some future generations shall travel with, so is Great-aunt Arizona for “those of us whose lives she touched...” Which includes every reader of this book.

## **OWEN**

By Kevin Henkes

Published by Troll Associates, 1993

### **Synopsis**

Owen has his security blanket (as other children do, or are attached to a doll, a teddy bear, whatever), and no matter what the adults do (thinking of ridicule that awaits Owen if he hangs on too long), Owen does not let go. So his parents accommodate him, with love and a sewing machine.

### **Potential**

Children's psychologist and other pedagogical experts have long advocated that adults give children room and time for growing up at their own pace (see also *Leo the Late Bloomer*). This book gives expression to it. It may be difficult for adults (like Mrs. Tweezer) to understand Owen's need for his blanket, and to follow Owen in his imaginative play with it, but this book says: lay off interfering, Owen will be ready to let go when he is ready. (Another gorgeous parallel book is *Ira Sleeps Over* by Bernard Weber).

Notice that imagination is a tool that enables Owen to grow up and be himself, in the face of a society that may ridicule him. And that love for him enables his parents to come up with the solution that will not expose their beloved son to unnecessary ridicule.

## **MY NAME IS ELIZABETH**

By Annika Dunklee, illustrated by Matthew Forsythe

Published by Kids Can Press, 2011

### **Synopsis**

Elizabeth only wants to be known by that name, and not any other.

### **Potential**

One's name is so important. One of the first stories in the Bible concerns names, when "the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field;" (Genesis 2:20). And a bit later he calls the wife God created from him "Woman" (23).

Most of us get a little irritated when our name is mispronounced, or misspelled. Our name is who we are, and not being precise may be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. Mind you, in multi-cultural Canada it is sometimes not easy to name right, what with names that come from all corners of the earth, and have forms not so familiar. But we should try.

This book reminded us of the story found in Exodus 3, the story we know as "Moses and the burning bush." When Moses is confronted by that burning bush, and is summoned by "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (notice, all names, and each name is a reminder that God was present in the lives of these three), the Moses asks God to be more precise about himself. So God tells him, I am YHWH (the way Hebrew spells it), of Yahweh as we say, (and some say Jehovah). But as scholars tell us: the name is a mystery, some say an expression of breath (as in hu-hu), or the equivalent of "It's not a name that defines me in human terms but a forever transcendent mystery." Which led Israelites to be very cautious about saying God's names.

Many names in the Bible have specific meanings that fit in with the story of which they are a part. The first chapter of the prophet Hosea has some interesting examples. Isaiah 9, often read in Advent times, predicts that a child will be born with many names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The Bible has a number of names for God, such as Adonai and Elohim. Easy to explore on Google.

## **JUST IN CASE**

By Judith Viorst, illustrated by Diana Cain Blumenthal

Published by Ginee Seo Books (imprint of Atheneum Books), 2006.

### **Synopsis**

Charlie has a problem: he is perpetually worried about what might happen to him. His defense is simple: prepare! But then his birthday comes, and he can't prepare for that (that is up to others). Will he have been forgotten? No, he hasn't. But birthdays are to be full of surprises. And that's okay.

### **Potential**

Charlie's anxiety reflect the anxiety of Western adults, who have so much faith in science and technology that will save them from disasters, for instance disasters brought on by global warming and an economy seemingly out of control. "But maybe not being ready is sometimes okay." Especially for Christians, who have faith that their future is in the hand of God. Many Psalms give expression to that. For instance, Psalm 139 says: "You (our emphasis) search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways...your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." (3 and 10).

That doesn't mean that we live in a passive way. Children need to be educated to prepare for the adult life of work and their own family. But it does mean that we learn to relativize our own anxieties, and live in trust that God is with us and cares for us, far more than science, technology and other people (governments!) can.

## **SUKI'S KIMONO**

By Chieri Uegaki, illustrated by Stephane Jorisch

Published by Kids Can Press, 2003

### **Synopsis**

It is the first day of school for Suki. Her older sisters are all dressed in the kind of new clothes their school friends will wear. But Suki wants to wear her new kimono, brought to her by her Grandma. Grandma also took her to a street festival, where she ate her Grandma's foods and learned how to dance her Grandma's dances. But her sisters want none of that, and they take care not to walk too close to her on the way to school. In school the other new kids first snicker at Suki, but when she dances the dance she had learned in her kimono, they applaud her, and she now belongs, different though she is. But her sisters come home grumbling, for no one had noticed them for being special.

### **Potential**

It takes courage to be different. It also takes courage to be friends with those who are different. A lesson to be learned by all Canadians, as we live in a country that is gradually assembling people from all over the world, people of different races, colours, religions, ways of dressing and eating. Schools can be prime places for learning how to respect and appreciate (love) each other, but homes must give the first pushes.

For Christians respect of differences is a must. It is grounded in Creation, for God created not just our "kind," but all the others, too. And saw that what He had done was good! Believers have often forgotten this responsibility to treat everyone with respect. In the gospels Jesus taught many lessons, in eating with sinners and tax collectors, in treating women with respect (when few others did), and in healing the blind, the deaf, the lepers, all of whom were often reduced to begging.

## **ZERO**

By Kathryn Otoshi

Published by KO Kids Books, 2010

### **Synopsis**

A book about numbers, especially about the number 0.

### **Potential**

This book is one big metaphor for the discovery that nothing and nobody is worthless, but that each of us adds value to all others. It's one of those books that may bring out an AHA in the minds of listeners and readers.

## WHAT YOU KNOW FIRST

By Patricia MacLachlan, Engravings by Bary Moser

Published by Joanna Cotler Books (imprint of HarperCollins), 1995.

### Synopsis

The story of a little girl who grew up on a farm, but now the family is leaving it. She will miss all the things she learned first, and can only take small reminders of it.

### Potential

In a book about homelessness (written by two Christian scholars) a distinction is made between “house” and “home.” House is dwelling, and home is the familiar which we shape, and then it shapes us. These authors also argue that in our global and mobile and mainly urban society the concept of home is weakening. Many people buy houses mainly for investment reasons. When municipalities and organizations propose building dwellings for the homeless and poor, neighbourhood residents object because that may ‘lower the real estate values.’

This book celebrates “home,” and mourns the loss of it. We do not get to know why the family sold the farm and its animals, but we can guess, and the black and white engravings may be the clues. Is the story set in the 1930s, when drought and winds made the prairies an inhospitable place for all? Is the hopeless struggle to make a living on such farms the reason why “Papa took a long walk when they came to take the cows away...”? And “everyone’s so sad”? All the little girl can take away is her memories, a twig and some dirt to remind her of what once was her home.

Those authors we cited argue that “home”, in narrow senses (dwelling) and wide one (neighbourhood, nation), are important components of a happy life. In this they echo Scriptures. Think of the Israelites who were promised a home, while their forebears (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) were no more than sojourners – passers-through. After the former Egyptian slaves arrived in the promised land, families were given perpetual ownership of plots of land (barring disasters), a truth vividly told in the story of king Ahab and Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21). The prophet Zechariah holds out the hope that after the return from Exile, each Israelite “will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree [the land surrounding the farm home], declares the Lord Almighty” (3:10). Psalm 128 also gives voice to this kind of happiness.

But isn’t interesting that the Bible also has human beings as God’s people as People on the Way, a motif primary in some other books? Spiritually (and Christians often feel it in their day-to-day living ) we are not to be only citizens of earthly kingdoms, but always hoping for, longing for, the kingdom of God (life as it should be lived.) This book gives us a hint of it, when Mama says “there’s an ocean in the new place,” and “Papa says there are trees.”

Actually, the Bible is full of “on the hand but...” and “all that you say is true, nevertheless...” Some people call those juxtapositions paradoxes, and others ambivalences, two thoughts that oppose each other but seem to be true next to another nevertheless.

## WILLIAM'S DOLL

By Charlotte Zolotow, pictures by William Pene Du Bois

Published by Harper & Row, 1972

### Synopsis

William is all boy. He is good at basketball, loves playing with model trains, but he keeps wanting a cuddly doll as well. His dad doesn't approve, and neither does his brother and the neighbour's boy. Only grandmother does, and she buys him the doll he wanted all along. And tells William's father why.

### Potential

This book was produced in the 1970's, a decade full of conversation about gender roles flowing out of an international movement in which women sought greater and more varied roles for themselves in all layers of society. But not without encountering resistance, mostly from men but also from women who (for their own reasons) wanted to hang on to the more traditional roles that recognized men as "The Head." Men would earn the family's living, and women should stay at home to care for children only women were created to do well. The Church, on the whole, sided with traditionalists, citing all kinds of Bible texts to bolster their case. The argumentations on both side often resembled the time in which slavery was both denounced and defended, and also the case for and against South African's apartheid, so firmly entrenched right then.

But here is a citation from the blog of Shiao Chong, a (Reformed) Christian.

"One of the common images is God as a mother bird sheltering her children under her wings. We see this in Ruth 2:12 – "May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (All references are from Today's New International Version.) The Psalms used this imagery a number of times:

*"Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings." (Psa. 17:8)*

*"... I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed." (Psa. 57:1)*

*"He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge ..." (Psa. 91:4)*

Jesus picks up these images when he laments over Jerusalem:

*"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34)*

These images paint God as a protecting and sheltering God for his people. But a variation of this image paints a God who also pushes his children to be independent and to grow stronger.

Mother eagles are known to teach their young ones to fly by deliberately pushing them out of its nest but catching them before they plunge to their doom: “[God] guarded [Jacob] as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.” (Deuteronomy 32:10-11)

Before we claim that the Bible only reinforces stereotypes of motherly warmth and care with these images of God, check out Hosea 13:8 – “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open,” says the Lord. Here, we see that the maternal instinct to protect the children can produce wrath as much as warmth. Beware the fury of a mother! No sentimental mother-image here.

### **God as Human Mother**

Of all the prophets, Isaiah seems to be the fondest in painting God as an actual human mother as these three verses attest:

*“For a long time I [God] have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.” (Isa. 42:14)*

*“As a mother comforts her child, so will I [God] comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.” (Isa. 66:13)*

*“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I [God] will not forget you!” (Isa. 49:15)*

(Adrian) That last verse is one of my favourite verses for use in the assurance of forgiveness in a worship service. I like for its compassionate and faithful portrayal of God but also because it is one of the few feminine images of God that I can use in a service. It reminds the congregation that God is beyond gender; the gender pronouns are simply metaphors to help us understand God who is always beyond our full understanding. As theologian Lynn Japinga wrote, “Language about God should help us to understand and encounter God, but we should not confuse the reality of God with the limits of our language.” ([\*Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide\*](#), Abingdon: 1999, p. 64)

I know there are many conservative Christians who are uneasy with using feminine images for God. But using female metaphors for God is not a radical feminist innovation as the biblical passages above show. It is also part of early Christian history. Here, I refer again to Japinga:

In the second century [Clement of Alexandria](#) mixed his metaphors in his description of Christians nursing at the breast of God the Father. Medieval mystic [Meister Eckhart](#) described God's activity: "What does God do all day long? God gives birth. From all eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth." (*Feminism and Christianity*, p. 65)

Mother's Day is as appropriate as any occasion to recapture the biblical maternal images for God to help us see further truths about God. "People described God in feminine terms, not because God is actually a woman, but because feminine or maternal traits say something true about God and about their experience with God." (Japinga, *Feminism and Christianity*, p. 66) The same must be said of masculine and paternal images for God. We must not confuse these metaphors with God's reality.

A component of the debates within Church circles was this controversy: should we limit God to a role as Father? Could we not also find texts in which God is portrayed as mother? (Yes, we could.) Should we alter Bible translations that only seemed to address men? (We did, substituting human being and humankind.)

This book is a contribution to the debates on the level of children. Its final point is that caring for children in loving ways is not the prerogative of stay-at-home women only.

## AMAZING GRACE

By Mary Hoffman, pictures by Caroline Binch

Published by Scholastic, 1991

### Synopsis

“Mary Grace was a girl who loved stories.” She is also good at acting them out, taking on one part after another, with or without the help of others. But when it comes to getting the prize part in a school play (Peter Pan), other kids tell her that she can’t have the part, because she is both black and a girl. But with the help of her mother, she proves them wrong. As her mother tells her, “You can be anything you want, Grace, if you put your mind to it.”

### Potential

It would be hard to imagine that any Christian you know wouldn’t think that, on merely seeing this book, this is a story version of how one of the most famous hymns was composed: who did it under what circumstances. But did it involve a black girl so young she still hasn’t grown her permanent teeth?

No, this is isn’t the story of the hymn, but it isn’t without connection. Here is the text of one verse of it.

*Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come;  
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far and Grace will lead me home.*

It seems that our girl Grace is facing many “toils” in working out how she can act out the stories she has heard and read. And what is the “grace” that enables her to do it? Imagination! Her mother knows that, for when Grace faces the “handicaps” of being black and a girl for the white male part of Peter Pan, her mother knows she has the imaginations, and also the experience.

Christians often overlook the importance of imagination for their life. Without imagination it is easy to lose sight of “The Kingdom of God” (life as it should be), and be content with life as it is. Imagination is enabled the Old Testament prophets to persist with their preaching that God does not accept life as it seemed to be right then. Prophets are Christians who know their culture, and imagine a better one. Hanging on to the vision of “the kingdom of God” requires imagination, also in our own days.

A prime example most of us know is found in Isaiah chapters 10 and 11. The chapter 10 passage beginning with “he has gone up from Rimmon” and ending with “...and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall” is actually a series of Hebrew puns (untranslatable in English). But what it says is that the Assyrians will invade from the north (verse 24), and will do bad things to all the places north of Jerusalem, and then also to Jerusalem, where the temple and the palaces, built with the cedars of Lebanon, will be damaged if not destroyed. But then in chapter 11 we receive a beautiful picture of what life could be. Beginning with a shoot arising from the stump (the remnants of God’s now captive folks), life will be restored to what it can be, where even former enemies (wolves and lambs), play together, and not mighty kings but a child will reign. It takes a prophet’s imagination to come up with such a vision, and it takes imagination for readers to believe them to be a true vision.

But is this book not an expression of the “American Dream,” the (false!) gospel that says that we can achieve total happiness (money, power, prestige) by hauling ourselves up by our own bootstraps? This book may be read this way (“she can do anything she want”), and it probably will be by those whose imagination has not been shaped by Christian caution. But then the author would not have decided to name this girl Grace, and not chosen “Amazing Grace” as the title of this book. For it is also easy to point out that “what she wants” is limited. She could never have become a 300 pound offensive guard in the Saskatchewan Roughrider football team! Etc. etc. But that is not the point.

## **THE REASON FOR A FLOWER**

By Ruth Heller

Penguin Young Readers, first published in 1983.

One of those books Christians might read and enjoy...but with at the end a question unanswered by the book itself.

For Ruth Heller the reason for a flower is its utility on the way to seeds, and thus underway to more plants of the same kind...which then produce flowers...etc. etc. etc.

Our critique is not intended to diminish that side of flowers, nor the splendor which the author/illustrator achieved by its fine use of language and splendid illustration.

But flowers have more utility than their place in a chain of biological progressions. For instance, flowers delight, not only bees but also human beings. Who isn't cheered by a vase full of daffodils when snow is still all around. Or roses on a special occasion like a birthday or graduation. And when Dutch growers of tulip fields behold their long stretches of colour in the month of April, they do not have bees and fruits in mind (tulips have no fruits anyway), but markets and revenues. And isn't the very splendor of this book's pages testimony to the notion that we must resist all attempts to reduce cultural complexity to matter and utility?

For instance, tulips have an intriguing history. Originally brought from Turkey by Dutch ships, the Dutch discovered that their soil and weather favoured the growing of tulips. Using their nursery experiences (and not formal evolutionary theory), they experimented with the originals to produce a multitude of types and colours, and prized especially darker ones leaning towards black (presumably because these were the hardest to cultivate). Their desires caused a craze for tulip bulbs that presumably came close to producing black tulips. In around the year 1636 bulbs with that promise fetched enormous prices, much like a run on some stock market company's shares suddenly popular. But, alas for many who foolishly invested in bulbs, in a short time the market collapsed, leaving many Dutch people in dire financial circumstances.

Parents might want to explore how flowers figure in their family, and in other families. Why flowers at weddings and funerals?

## **The Name Jar**

By Yangsook Choi

Published by Dragonfly Books, 2001

## **THE NAME JAR**

By Yangsook Choi

Published by Dragonfly Books, 2001.

One of the New Testament texts often cited in defense of eradicating indefensible barriers that keep people apart is Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Sometimes this text gets coupled with Genesis 1:27: "So God created man (that is humankind) in his own image, in the image of God he created them." Every man, woman and child created in God's image, and therefore of equal worth. Such thoughts exclude not only slavery, but also treating any human being as less worthy than oneself, even though such a human being may speak another language, look differently, and lives in a very different cultural framework. Such a stance is especially important in a country like Canada, with its constant annual stream of immigrants, each year around 250,000. This book brings that message home.

### **Synopsis**

Unhei has just arrived in the USA from Korea with her family, and this is her first day at school. It doesn't begin well when some of the children make fun of her Korean name. It makes her want to change her name, but she doesn't know to what. She tries out a few English names. Some of her classmates try to help her, by putting a glass jar on her desk with slips of paper with names like Tamela and Daisy. But then she meets Joey, who thinks that her Korean name is just dandy. It gives her the courage to hang on to her Korean name (which means "grace").

### **Potential**

One's own name is such an important thing. Your name is who you are. The Bible is full of examples that demonstrate the importance of name. Right in the beginning Adam's first major job is to name the animals. (Genesis 2:19-20). And when God brings Adam a companion, he immediately names her "woman" (2:23).

The Old Testament has many lists of names, especially in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In the latter not just "so many people did this or that, but specific names. Often a person is identified as being "the son of A the son of B the son of C", etc. To monkey with one's name is to diminish oneself. Many immigrants from non-English speaking countries feel compelled to Anglicize their names at first. Sometimes those new names stick to the end of their lives, but sometimes they revert to the names with which they were born. Here is one example. We know a woman who was born in Canada to immigrant parents and named after her maternal grandmother Margaretha. But her parents began to name her Margaret, and when she learned to pronounce her name, this was changed to Marty. She also came to be called Maggie and Marg sometimes, and one of her colleagues even called her Margie. But then, when she was in her early 50;s she began to use her full given name again, Margaretha, and now she is known that way everywhere, also in her profession.

This story is an invitation to safeguard the name a person believes to be of utmost importance, even though it may take some effort to learn to say and spell it.

In this story Joey is the most understanding classmate Unhei has. He understands his new friend, and supports her finding her own way in her own time. It is a model for how we all should treat newcomers, not as strangers who need to become like us, but as strangers we welcome and value.

Immigrants from non-English speaking countries have often struggled with the name they bring, and the name that would fit the new country.

Example:

Adrian's wife was born in Holland, and given the name Johanna Petronella, But that was too long as name for daily use, so her parents and others called her "Joke" (a common Dutch short form for Johanna). Clearly that short form could not be used when she and her family emigrated to Canada. So, with the help of people in her first job, she adopted "Joan" as her new name, but never felt entirely good about that. One day, already married, she and her own family moved to another city, and then she decided to go back to the name given to her at birth, namely Johanna. Some people do not quite catch the fact that it has an "h" in it, and call her Joanne, but she often (kindly) corrects them, stressing the "h" and giving the whole name the original Dutch pronunciation.

## **Wilfrid Gordon MacDonald Partridge**

By Mem Fox, illustrated by Julie Vivas

First published by omnibus Books, 1984, now in a Puffin edition.

### **Synopsis**

This boy with four names lives next to an old people's home. He knows all the people who live there, and he has a relationship with them. Various relationships, depending on who those friends are. With some he talks, to others he listens, with some he plays, for others he runs errands, and some he simply admires. One day he discovers that one of his friends has lost her memory. Wilfrid doesn't quite know what memory is, but he tries to find out, and then begins to look for memories for his friend Nancy. He puts a collection of objects in a basket, and shares them with her...and discovers that Nancy has recovered memories.

### **Potential**

Memories are important in the lives of people, just like names (connect with "The Name Jar"). Memories are the reminders of how one's life has been in the past, and how connected to places and people. Nancy recalls birds in her aunt's garden, going to the beach by tram, her brother who died in a war, her sister, and then the stories she had shared with Wilfrid Gordon. She then smiled, the story tells us, for without memory she had not been part of the lives of others anymore, but now she is back again in relationships, not especially with this kind, loving, sharing boy. Without memory she was isolated and not really part of the community. But through the boy, and with her memories revived, she was alive again.

The book is also a timely reminder about the responsibility of Christians not to forget their elders. All around the globe people are aging, and living longer than ever before. But with aging come handicaps, like dementia and Alzheimer. Perhaps this book is a spur for parents to raise their children with an awareness of responsibility towards older people. Encourage their children to talk to seniors, in church and other places.

## **Verdi**

By Janell Cannon

Published by Harcourt, Inc. 1997

### **Synopsis**

Verdi is a young python living in the forest on a tropical island. One day his mother sends him and his siblings away from “home” so they find their own way, and become regular green pythons. “Grow up big and green – as green as the trees’ leaves,” she tells them all.

But Verdi is not anxious to become green. Like all children, he loves to play, and he thinks he looks good as he is (yellow with “sporty stripes”). The Green pythons he meets everywhere are not much help to him. They seem so docile, and not interested in adventures. But he does grow up, becomes green, and then learns that all the adults were once like him.

One day, now a green like all the others, he meets two youngsters, still yellow, and they talk about him as he used to talk about his elders. But instead of belittling them (as he was belittled) he plays with them. One day they will be as green as he is now.

### **Potential**

It’s a story about growing up and changing. But change at its own pace, in accordance with the time God gives for childhood, adulthood, and being a senior.

Unfortunately this is often misunderstood. Many parents, under the influence of media and “expert” urgings, push their children. We think of the pressure parents put on their children to academically shine in school so that universities will welcome them and lucrative jobs will be theirs in the end. (We think that the incidences of teenage suicide are one outcome.) We also think of parents who push their very young daughters into becoming desirable females, some through beauty pageants. Some worried children’s psychologists point out that for many children life is over-organized (“soccer moms”), with little time for children to experiment with the world through play and invented games.

This book gives opportunity to see the course of human life as having its own proper rhythm. Childhood is not something to be marched through with undue haste in the belief that it’s better left behind quickly. It is a stage of life to be thankful for, as a gift of God.