Julias Vivas: An Artist Who Celebrates Everyday Living

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Eating, growing old, looking and questioning, and feeling the daily discomforts of pregnancy—simple everyday living may not be considered exciting topics for stories, but these have been the focus of the tales illustrated by well-known Australian artist Julie Vivas. Vivas lives with her husband and two children in Sidney, Australia. Her work has been honored by her peers; her works include The Nativity (1988), named an ALA Notable Book and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book; The Very Best of Friends (Wild, 1990), an ALA Notable Book; and Let the Celebrations Begin! (Wild, 1991), an American Booksellers Pick of the Lists. How has this artist motivated readers to finish books that deal with ordinary, everyday events. Examples from her books provide the answers.

In 1985 Vivas illustrated Mem Fox’s Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge, the story of a small boy who lived near a nursing home. The boy’s favorite nursing home inmate was Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper, because she has as many names as he does. Vivas’ bright watercolors, rounded bodies, and childlike facial expressions made this nursing home into a cheerful place, but it focused on loss of memory—a disability no one wants to think about. When Wilfrid hears his parents lamenting Nancy’s loss of memory he decides to find it for her; first he asks for definitions and then objects from his past to fit what the old folks tell him about memory. When Nancy sees them she remembers things that have happened to her. Find the book and look at the hairy, rainbow-colored puppet—a memory that makes everyone laugh. It’s a story of triumph—finding lost memories of the aged.

Possum Magic (Mem Fox, 1987) focuses on eating—a continental sampling of Australian taste sensations. The two possums are trying to find “people food” that will undo the invisible spell on the younger possum, Hush. Again, Vivas’ rounded shapes make the animals cuddly, friendly, and nonchalant. The people are the same in all sorts of sprawled, informal positions, usually standing out against a white background. Readers will probably find themselves wanting to try the foods that render Hush visible even as they are delighted that the possum changes from a fuzzy outline to a real, full-color animal.

Vivas’ retelling of The Nativity (1988) is untraditional in its focus on the everyday dirt and problems of living—even the angel arrives wearing boots for
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negotiating muddy fields. (I can't believe some herald angels wouldn't enjoy Vivas' sense of humor as she pushes readers to consider the dirty part of living in the Holy Land.) A tired, disheveled, heavy Mary is portrayed as Joseph tries to hoist her on the donkey for the journey to Bethlehem, and yet Vivas' Mary is innocent, young, and vulnerable. The illustrations focuses attention on how tiring that journey must have been (being the mother of the Son of God didn't alleviate the discomfort of pregnancy) and emphasizes the heroism of all expectant mothers in coping with daily discomfort.

I Went Walking (Sue Williams, 1989) shows vibrant watercolored animals. The child's unkempt hair, raised eyebrows (a typical Vivas expression), and wide eyes communicates the wonder of a young child exploring his world. The book makes the development of relationships with animals a joyous event and made taking time simply to look a worthwhile activity.

The Very Best of Friends (Wild, 1990) showes the little everyday acts that help to repair a lost friendship with a mean, lean cat who hates everything and everyone. Nurse Lugton's Curtain (Virginia Woolf, 1991) simply tells of the joy of ordinary drinking, eating, and moving when animals are released from their static "curtain prison." Let the Celebrations Begin! (Wild, 1991) is about holocaust victims awaiting their fate in a German prison camp. But the book is truly a celebration that is probably best understood by those above nine years of age. Barbara Marinik observes,

When Let the Celebrations Begin! arrived I knew it had to be the book to start with. But no one could have prepared me for the children's reaction. After reading this powerful picture book, I was almost afraid to leave the classroom. An entire room of ordinarily exuberant adolescents sat totally silent. They hung on every word, eyes filled with tears as the stark illustrations were revealed. ("Books in the Classroom—The Holocaust," Horn Book Magazine, vol. 69, pp. 368-372)

The story, based on an actual situation (see the aerial view of the prison, reproduced on the next page), is told by Miriam, a woman old enough to remember eating chicken. Notice her long hair and more rounded arms and body as she imagines eating skin, fat, and bones that she didn't even like in days of plenty (picture at end of article).
A small collection of stuffed toys has been preserved that were made by Polish women in Belsen for the first children's party held after the liberation.

From *Antique Toys and their Background* by Gwen White (B. T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1971).

Aerial View of the Prison. Taken from *Let the Celebrations BEG I N!* Copyright ©1991 by Julie Vivas. Reprinted by permission from Orchard Books, A division of Franklin Watts, Inc.
The children in the prison camp have never had toys so Miriam describes again and again her soft pink elephant, the doll whose eyes blinked, and the teddy bear with the squeak. Look for the illustration of a soft-looking elephant (sorry, no pink in our black-and-white reproduction), a doll with sparkling eyes, and a teddy bear with a belly button that squeaks. The soft watercolors and rounded shapes make the prison camp a more hopeful, less stark place. Even selfish, complaining Jacoba in the story can’t resist the fun of making toys for children. In the last illustration notice the interesting textures of the patchwork toys as the prisoners rejoice in liberation by Allied armies and lots of chicken soup! These skinny women with shaved heads and ragged clothes represent a triumph of the human spirit over the most degrading and unjust circumstances.

*Our Granny* (Wild, 1994) provides a loving look at one particular grandmother while exploring the possibility of all kinds of lifestyles and personalities for other grannies. Focusing on everyday things like clothes, playing, and exercising, Vivas’ illustrations characterize wobbly bottoms and baggy clothes through the loving eyes of children who adore their granny.

So how does Vivas make everyday living exciting? By showing a childlike view of the world—one of hope, wonder, and delight, and with a gentle humor which softens the frailties of human beings. Vivas’ exaggeratedly awkward, positions of the human body pushes the reader to both sympathy and laughter. Scruffy, unkempt hair is another commonality—and who doesn’t feel kinship with a “bad hair day.” And finally, Vivas’ childlike adults and wise children come out as winners. They celebrate everyday experiences and conquer everyday problems—inviting readers to go out and do likewise.
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