

The Wichita Eagle

Books

Posted on Thu, Sep. 08, 2005

TOP STORY

Misery loves company

Having a bad day? One of the best ways to cope, no matter what your age, is to realize you're not alone.

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The Wichita Eagle

Even 5-year-olds get the blues. For Alexander, the main character in Judith Viorst's children's book, "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," it starts with gum in his hair. It ends when the cat sleeps with his brother Anthony instead of him. Among the countless tragedies in between are a trip to the dentist, lima beans (blech!), kissing on TV (double blech!) and railroad-train pajamas. Harumph.

Bad days are part of life, no matter what your age. Little aggravations can foul your mood and leave you grumbling.

But a good way to deal with them is to recognize you're not alone.

Harriet Ziefert, author of a new series of "Misery" books for kids and adults, has long encouraged parents and teachers to let children express their feelings in misery journals.

As a teacher in her home state of New Jersey, Ziefert once implored her fifth-grade class to talk about things that made them miserable. The list included everything from baby sisters to dead goldfish and served as inspiration for Ziefert's just-released book, "Misery Is a Smell in Your Backpack" (Blue Apple Press, \$9.95).

"My goal is to make sure (children's) books address a whole range of emotions," Ziefert said. "There are too many books that are too sweet, too saccharine. Everyone is happy, everything is good, everything is fine. And that's just not real life."

"Misery Is a Smell in Your Backpack" features drawings by Jennifer Rapp, a Chicago artist whose characters implore a dark, almost Tim Burton-like quality. Some excerpts:

"Misery is when you're warm in your bed and the floor is cold and the alarm clock shouts: 'IT'S TIME FOR SCHOOL!' "

"Misery is when your mom insists on sensible school shoes and you really want flip-flops."

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"Misery is when you feel horrible, rotten, nasty, dreadful and mean, and someone says, 'Hi! How are you?' "

"It's nothing huge, nothing truly terrible. They're more like little aggravations," Ziefert said. "There's a big difference between this and what's going on in New Orleans right now. But this sort of stuff does need to be acknowledged, because it's real.

"Teachers and parents should try to get these feelings out in the open, down on paper and let them be talked about."

Ziefert's first book, "Misery Is a Spider in the Bathtub," was published last year. Two more, aimed at older audiences and focusing on wedding miseries and pregnancy miseries, will be released in the spring.

Rapp, the illustrator, said she identifies with children and understands how even the smallest annoyances can seem like a major tragedy.

Something like "finding out your mom is pregnant," for instance, isn't always the joyous occasion parents and other adults assume it should be.

"So much of children's lives are out of their control," said Rapp, 38, who is expecting her first baby in January. "I think it's great when kids' books tell the truth, the not-so-pretty truth. It's the human condition."

Ziefert and Rapp hope parents and caregivers will use their books as a jumping-off point for discussions about all kinds of emotions. Ziefert envisions families making their own, personalized "misery book," with items culled from some of the bad days parents and children have.

The message?

"Of course we all have bad days, and that's OK," Rapp said. "Life isn't meant to be all happy, all the time."

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BOOKS FOR BAD DAYS

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- "Misery Is a Smell in Your Backpack," by Harriet Ziefert, illustrations by Jennifer Rapp (Blue Apple Books, 2005).

School days can be full of little miseries -- forgetting your lunch, getting in trouble, being checked for head lice. Sometimes the perfect pick-me-up is just knowing you're not alone.

- "Misery Is a Spider in the Bathtub," Ziefert and Rapp (Blue Apple Books, 2004).

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Ziefert and Rapp's first book highlights more annoyances, including splinters, bad presents and having a curfew.

- "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," by Judith Viorst, illustrations by Ray Cruz (Atheneum, 1972).

"I went to sleep with gum in my mouth, and now there's gum in my hair, and when I got out of bed this morning, I tripped on the skateboard..." Alexander offers the cranky commiseration we all crave, as well as a reminder that things may not be that bad.