

Only You

Rosemary Wells

Viking Press, 14 pages

Reviewed by Stephen Spitalny

Only You is a very special children's picture book. It is a celebration of everyday life that a parent and child share. It is also a powerful tool for adult education. The proceeds from the sales of this book go to Jumpstart, an early childhood organization. One could say that telling stories is what we do in Waldorf education for the young child. Then why are we reviewing a picture book? There are many reasons.

Only You is a love poem from a baby bear to his mother. It is a celebration of the unique relationship between parent and child and, in an imaginative way, points to the critical importance of simple activities for the young child. Written warmly with few words and simple, colorful illustrations, this is a book about truly spending quality time together

with a child, the essential time that nurtures and shapes the developing human being. This is a book for every school's parent library and should be considered a must-read for teachers and parents alike.

Rosemary Wells has written and illustrated more than sixty children's books. During this time, she has garnered many awards and created some unforgettable characters. Most of her characters are animals who experience situations of everyday life. She says that animals can do things in pictures that children cannot. If the pictures were of children, they would be too close to reality for comfort. Perhaps children can experience situations in stories that they themselves might experience in real life in a more objective way if animals are the characters. Rosemary

Wells is also an advocate for young children and a protector of early childhood. Her web site <www.rosemarywells.com> is a resource worth exploring!

The following is an excerpt from a speech she gave, entitled "Children at Risk:"

The child who sits in a reader's lap is more privileged than a child who is given a fancy computer game, state-of-the-art sports equipment, or designer clothes. This child can be poor. He can live in the meanest streets of a huge city or in a house trailer in the far reaches of the rural hills. But if his father sits and reads to him quietly for half an hour a day, this boy is not at risk. He is blessed, and will grow up smart and strong. A child who listens to a story nightly receives a huge head start in life. This child can own one pair of old shoes and eat free breakfast and lunch at school, but if her mother reads to her, this girl is blessed and will look you in the eye and speak forthrightly. The child who goes to a private school in his father's limousine but does not have a reader's lap to sit in every night, will be emptier for this. No video games, no television shows, no Game Boys will help him. The child who does not grow up with lots of stories and songs in her parents' voices may be a junior Beauty Queen in the third grade, but she will be emptier for this. No amount of trendy clothes, big birthday parties or cell phones will help her. The child who is read to, regularly and often, will develop not only a facility with learning, but a healthy imagination. That child is getting a big dose of one-on-one love, and this will show as the child grows up. He or she will likely become a producer in this world. The child who lives in a home where people have no time for each other, a bookless world, one where the TV and the radio are always on and shopping is the preoccupation of the family, will likely not find it easy to develop much imagination. This can describe millions of American children's lives in both poverty and great wealth. The mother and father of that little boy or girl have a child at risk.

But here is the good news. Parents can turn this entire pattern around in about a month of intensive regular reading. It takes only a library card and the will to change. A mother, taking time every day to read a book aloud to her child, is giving her baby the gift of thought and language. Reading often, starting young, a father gives his child a whole world of his own to dream about. Parents who read to their children are giving of themselves, of their time. By not saying, "I'm too tired, I'm too busy, I want to do something else"—they are giving love. They are giving their voice,

their patience and, more importantly, they are giving pure love.

On back-to-school night [near my home town] in October, the teacher asked for a show of hands of families who would be willing to read twenty minutes a day to their youngsters, as regularly as they brushed their teeth. These families kept their promises through thick and thin, through celebrations and emergencies, through job losses, illnesses, holidays, vacations, house-guests, hurricanes, and all else that happened in their lives. After nine months, these parents wrote reports which the school shared with me. Those families reported that their relationships with their children had changed. Children listened more to what their parents said, and parents listened to their children. The kids demanded fewer trips to the shopping mall and whined less. They played better on their own; their attention spans improved dramatically and they all did better in school. The good news is, this can work in any community in America. All it takes is willing teachers and parents. The kids are easy.

Additionally, it is important to give parents, who may be reticent about telling stories, tools they can use. Everyone wants children to grow up and be readers, so reading to them can be an example for something they themselves will do later on. At the back of the book is a short note from Dr. Perri Ellis. Dr. Ellis is a revolutionary pediatrician who thinks imagination and love are keys to a child's continuing health. Her note is succinct and powerful: a reminder that the parents' relationship to the child during the first three years of the child's life are critically important. This note in itself would be reason enough to read this lovely little book.

Rosemary Wells has created a book that no parent or teacher should be without. Go out and buy extra copies of *Only You* to give away.

