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**Robin Black: My Daughter's Search for Words**

It took me many years to realize both the similarity and the very crucial difference between how my daughter and I spend much of our time. As a writer, I work all day to find the words I need, while my daughter, because of her expressive language disability, also works all day to do the same. For quite a while, years, that distorted mirror-image flickered just outside my full attention, like a light in one’s peripheral vision, noticed, but indistinct. And then one day, writing at my desk, I couldn’t think of a particular word, a word that meant precisely what I needed it to mean, but also carried in it some hint of otherness, as so many words do. And I wanted to capture all of that: The precision and the nuance. I remember being frustrated with myself for being unable to snatch it from the place where such perfect words hide, obscured by ones that are almost the same. And I remember, too, enjoying the chase.

In the midst of this, my daughter came home from school, from first grade; and, after a hug, she said, “Mommy, can I have a glass of. . . . of . . .”

I waited to see if she would get it. I had been warned that if I kept finishing all her sentences, it would grow more difficult for her to do.

“. . .of. . .of. . .”

“Milk,” I supplied.

“Right.” She nodded. “Milk.”

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We suspected from early in her life, that something might be amiss but I didn’t have the right word for that either. Just a lot of strange stuff, was how I thought of it. She didn’t crawl until she was over a year. She didn’t repeat sounds I made, in that way babies do. She took no delight in rhymes, even at three and four. Her speech resisted syntax, seemed incapable of organizing itself into conventional structures, so her utterances had a persistently telegraphic quality to them. I caught myself supplying words for her, as though she were elderly, a little senile.

My daughter was four years old the day she and I sat outside, on our back step. I was armed with a sheet of white paper, a box of markers and the determination to make some headway this time. I drew a C. “The C makes a kuh, sound,” I said for the gazillionth time. “Kuh. Like cat.” I drew a hasty cat face next to the letter. I repeated the word: cat. “Now what sound does a C make?”

She looked at me with such genial openness, so unmistakably unpressured to respond; and I understood as I never had before. Everything I had just said—including the fact that I had asked her a question—was meaningless to her.

In a perfect world, she would have been tested the next day and all the appropriate interventions would have started that week, but her pre-school discouraged me. She was still well within the range of normal, I was told. Children learn to read different ages. My older two children had been exceptionally early readers—I was holding her to too high a standard. I was in danger of pathologizing a perfectly “normal” intelligent child.

Intelligent, yes. She was—and she is. She’s extremely intelligent. But “normal?” I really didn’t think so. Still, I didn’t rush her off to be evaluated. Who was I to argue with the experts? And I wasn’t in such great shape myself back then, subject to crippling bouts of depression and anxiety after a late pregnancy loss. My confidence in my own judgment was at a very low point. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was seeing gloom and doom everywhere. Maybe I was, as the school implied, being somehow unfair to my child.

And anyway, wouldn’t it be nice to think they were right?

The months crept by, while my concerns about both of us ebbed and flowed. Her development; my emotional health. I would talk to her teachers, they would tell me to calm down. I would tell myself to calm down, then have a panic attack about something else. I would convince my husband that there was a problem, then turn around and tell him I was just taking my anxieties out on her. Nearly a year had passed, my daughter five, before I took concrete steps to address either of our situations to any real effect.

That fall, she entered kindergarten and I began attending a fiction-writing workshop—picking up on a pursuit I had let fall away for many years. And as soon as I began writing I felt the potential for an internal, emotional balance that had been eluding me. Situating myself among words, arranging them, feeling them flow through me as I conveyed my own understanding of the world brought a profound comfort and sense of a new purpose to my life.

My daughter’s kindergarten experience was a different story, though. While I discovered a welcoming home in language, she encountered only barred doors. By November, her school was ready to allow for the possibility that something was “atypical” in her development. They thought that she probably should be tested, after all.

We parents, we shine our children up like jewels to highlight what is strongest, most capable in them. Even with all my anxieties, I had been doing it for years. Finishing her sentences, translating her telegraphic utterances to all listeners. Smoothing her way, trying to. Smoothing her into a different child. Polishing, polishing. Not knowing it, not really, until I watched her testing through a one way mirror, the process in reverse, the glowing, smooth layers stripped back, the rough edges, the fault lines revealed.

We were told that she had an array of language-related disabilities, including an almost complete lack of phonemic awareness, the quality that enables people to distinguish sounds from one another, the quality that makes you able to understand that the word cat is comprised of three sounds. Kuh-ah-tuh. It was going to take extraordinary measures for her to learn how to read, endless interventions for her to converse effectively. And a lot would depend on her, we were told. On how hard she would work.

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That was twelve years ago. In the decade-plus since, our respective relationships to language have been ever more clearly defined. I began publishing stories in 2003, went for my MFA, started teaching creative writing at universities, sold two books to a large publishing house. While my daughter’s travels through school have revealed more and more linguistic hurdles she has to clear. The list of her challenges is long, the ways in which each seems to strengthen the power of the others are fiendish.

And we now define ourselves, both of us, by our relationship to language. Ask me “What do you do?” and the answer is “I’m a writer.” Ask my daughter the same question, and the answer is “I go to a school for kids with learning disabilities.”

Something we share; and something we don’t.

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When my books sold, in 2008, I waited to feel the joy that famously accompanies such news. And it never arrived. I was glad for the sale; but in a decidedly muted way. Everyone else seemed so ecstatic for me, while the whole thing had nothing to do with what really would bring me joy. “There’s only so happy I can be,” I told close friends. “This doesn’t make my child’s problems any better. It’s just something good that happened to me.”

The unspoken phrase was: and that can never happen for her.

What if we were talking about a sport? I ask myself sometimes. What about the woman who decides to become a professional runner just as she learns that her daughter will always walk with a cane? What about the trophies she collects? Are they out on display on a shelf? Hidden away? Does her daughter wait for her, cheering, at the finish line?

Sometimes, I feel as though I have stolen something that by rights belongs to her. That there is a certain reasonable quotient of pleasure from language to which each of us is entitled, and I took her share, leeched it off her somehow. Saved myself when I should have saved her. I wept when my galleys arrived, not for joy as we authors are scripted to do, but from a terrible deep sorrow, a grief in me that glitters and glistens perpetually with guilt.

That’s not of much consequence though. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter what I make of this imbalance of ours. It matters what my daughter makes of her life. Now. Later. This is her story, not mine. My role is a supporting one. I wish it weren’t. Because in that story, the one in which I do star, I sacrifice everything I have and make her whole. My computer bursts into flames. The pages of my books dissolve, the words dance their way toward my child, who inhales them deeply, allows them to fill her, and easily, easily breathes them out.

But my daughter is the heroine here, heroic indeed as she battles the forces that have weighted her—for no reason at all—with these struggles.

“I think I should write a novel for kids your age,” I told her one day, thinking, I suppose, she would feel more included in the work I do, maybe trying to demonstrate that I can amend my inclinations to suit her reading skills.

She shot me a fast, piercing look, and shook her head. “No way,” she said. “I’m the one in this family doing that. I claim it. The novel writing thing for kids.”

And there it is. Finally. The joy I never otherwise feel. Joy, because whatever I may perceive as mine not hers, my daughter rejects the notion that everything pleasurable about language belongs to me. Joy, because she has no hesitation in staking her claim.

“I look forward to reading it,” I said. “It’s all yours.”

 *Robin Black's debut novel* Life Drawing *has been called "a magnificent literary achievement," by Karen Russell, and "a riveting story about the corrosive effects of betrayal," by Alice Sebold. Her 2010 story collection* If I loved you, I would tell you this *was a Finalist for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Prize and an* Oprah Magazine *Summer Reading Pick. Robin currently teaches in the Brooklyn College MFA Program and blogs at BeyondtheMargins.com. She lives with her family in Philadelphia where she is at work on her next book.*