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Celebrating young writers

BY DAUN DAEMON

A parent's expectations must soar at the sight of a title like "Exactly Ten Beavers, Nine Fairies, Eight Dreams, Seven Knights, Six Princesses, Five Dogs, Four Otters, Three Old Men, Two Robots, One Traveling Shoe & Everything Else It Takes to Make a Great Children's Story Book (More or Less)."

To those looking for new material to instruct and entertain their kids, the titular list is especially alluring -- surely, every child will find stories to satisfy his or her curiosity. With 56 illustrated tales, the volume is bound to hold a kid's attention for longer than 60 seconds.

This isn't a picture book, however, and its audience is not small children. It's exactly what the subtitle says it is: a collection of stories by high school students. While these authors write about children and the common fears and pitfalls of childhood, these stories haven't been shaped for any child under 10.

The collection is a product of 826 Valencia, a nonprofit writing center for kids ages 6 to 18 in San Francisco. Founded by Pulitzer-nominated author Dave Eggers ("A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius"), 826 has expanded to other major cities and offers kids and teens a chance to improve their writing skills and explore their creative talents.

The various programs all give the young authors a chance to publish their work, and this book is the most ambitious project to date. As the director of children's and teen's writing workshops, I can only dream about the kind of funding necessary to mass produce and market a hardback book of this quality.

My astonishment (and, yes, envy) aside, I was impressed by the size of these stories. As many teachers will acknowledge, getting even one page of written words from a teen nowadays can be a monumental undertaking. These teens do more: They pay attention to the basic elements of fiction and create vivid settings and clever characters. Many of the authors describe their imagined worlds without relying on clichés. Clearly, the teachers at 826 Valencia are dedicated to craft.

Though the title indicates a heavy focus on fantasy, these stories are not akin to the prettied versions of Grimms' fairy tales. In fact, some are fairly grim urban tales of alienation and abuse. Bullies make numerous appearances, as do children who don't fit in -- even if they are in the guise of otters or ladybugs. Some characters learn to make friends or find redemption in a difficult situation.

The most common theme is that being different isn't a bad thing for a kid. Self-respect is often in short supply at a story's beginning, but a quick trip down the forest path/into the playground/up the stairs is sufficient to lead a bunny/zebra/child to a neat epiphany: "I'm OK just the way I am."

Noble as the effort is, this is an uneven collection of stories. As expected, some of the teens are more capable storytellers than others, creating and sustaining characters while moving the tale along to a tidy ending. Some ramble and lack fresh vision, with a few derivative of pop culture phenomena, and others put a new twist on familiar folk and fairy tales.

A few stories stand out for their freshness and simplicity. "My Hair Fred" is a cute tale about a boy

learning to love his unruly hair. "The Shoe That Traveled the World" tells of a bored tennis shoe that hitches rides in backpacks to see the wonders of China, Paris and Africa.

One illustration by a professional Bay Area artist accompanies each story. The styles range wildly, from ink drawings reminiscent of Escher to ethereal watercolors to graphic art that resembles Saturday morning cartoons.

Practically speaking, the book is unwieldy. A 246-page hardback the size of a coffee-table book, "Exactly" won't be easily handled by small children eager to look at the artwork. Like any workshop anthology, this book is most valuable as a keepsake for the teen authors and a point of pride for their parents.

The greatest achievement of this collection is recognized by the teens themselves in the book's introduction: "We wrote these stories to teach lessons, but what did we learn? That we can write! We actually wrote a book; teenagers can do something like that if we're given the chance."

That proclamation is exactly the point.

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