First Opinion: Art, Metaphor, and More Questions Than Answers


*Caitlin L. Ryan*

In a recent dialogue in *Time* magazine, award-winning authors Matt de la Peña and Kate DiCamillo concluded that exploring challenging, dark, sad truths about the world is an important part of writing for young people. Yet, DiCamillo wondered, “How do [authors] tell the truth and make that truth bearable” when writing for children?

In many ways, Oliver Jeffers’s book, *The Heart and the Bottle*, reads as a response to that challenge. The book explores universal themes of love, loss, and healing through the story of a young girl who loses a cherished older loved one, presumably her grandfather. After this loss, “the girl thought the best thing was to put her heart in a safe place. Just for the time being. So she put it in a bottle and hung it around her neck” (Jeffers unpaged). The cost of such safety, of course, is the girl’s separation from her own heart. Only after growing up and encountering another passionate, curious little girl does she realize the toll this arrangement has taken on her, but she doesn’t know how to fix it. The new little girl, however, finds a way to get the heart out of the bottle and returns it to her, reawakening her interest in the world.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the book is the art. Thick pages display a vibrant mix of gouache, watercolor, collage, and digitally created images, many of which float as visually rendered thought and dialogue bubbles that give insight into the characters’ minds and conversations. The repeated scribble detail used to indicate shadow adds depth, texture, and a fitting childlike energy to the visual story. The busy collage style of the book’s cover reflects the rapidly flowing curiosity the little girl possessed at the beginning of the book. This stands
in stark contrast to the solid yellow of the book’s jacket, depicting simply the little girl standing next to a large glass bottle with a small heart trapped inside. This design parallels the story, visually representing how the young girl’s imagination and wonder become hidden from her as a result of her grief.

I love the big ideas this book addresses, particularly its descriptions of grief and depression as a time when nothing feels the same and you lose interest in things you previously loved. However, I was left with questions that clouded the book’s emotional power for me. First of all, I wondered why the little girl was represented as completely alone after the loss of her loved one until she grew up and met the other little girl. If we’re trying to make truth bearable for children, showing support from others during grief seems important, even if we still feel alone. Similarly, I wondered about the book’s sudden shift from brain to heart. The first time hearts are mentioned is on the page where the little girl removes hers. Deeper discussion of her pain and its relation to her heart would have made this shift less jarring. On a similar note, the text’s concrete, literal use of a heart in a bottle to stand for an abstract experience of self-protection comes off as confusing, particularly for children less familiar with such figurative language to conceptualize those emotions. The physical operationalization of this emotional impulse is, of course, the device on which the book is based, but the anatomical illustrations of the heart, both in the pages of the text and in the back endpapers, further emphasize the literal organ, making the girl’s choice to remove her heart perplexing and perhaps even scary for young children. Such tension between figurative and literal events arises again when the new little girl just so happens to know a way to get the heart out of the bottle, although no mechanism, neither magical nor otherwise, is ever mentioned or explained.

With more text to flesh out the allegorical aspects of the story, Jeffers’s book might have become more like *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* by William Joyce, where the fantastic elements and metaphors are clearer and therefore pack a deeper emotional punch. As it stands, however, the book asks the reader to fill in many of the unstated gaps. Questions to talk through with children might include: Why would she take her heart out? What does that mean? Why does taking her heart out make her feel safe? Why would she not be able to talk to the little girl without her heart? How did the little girl get it out of the bottle? Without such conversations, much of the book’s potential could easily be lost.

Indirectly invoking Rudine Sims Bishop’s conception of books as windows and mirrors (ix), de la Peña writes, “There’s a power to seeing [the dark, heavy] largely unspoken part of our interior lives represented, too. And for those who’ve yet to experience that kind of sadness, I can’t think of a safer place to explore complex emotions for the first time than inside the pages of a book, while sitting in the lap of a loved one” (55). Jeffers’s book gets at an important interior experience, but the safe, mediated context de la Peña mentions would also be the best environment for making sure young readers are able to grasp the meanings and messages in this text.
Works Cited


About the Author

Caitlin L. Ryan is an associate professor of Reading Education in the College of Education at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Her teaching and research focus on ways to make reading and literacy at the elementary level more inclusive, authentic, and equity-oriented. Most of her publications investigate how diverse children's literature might help open up new ways of thinking related to LGBTQ and other marginalized identities in elementary school classrooms.