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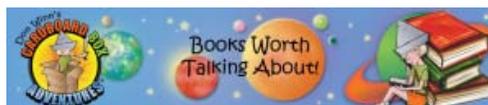
An Interview with Don M. Winn: Adventures in a Cardboard Box?

Posted by Michael Shaughnessy EducationViews Senior Columnist on February 1, 2012 in Book Reviews, Editor's Pick

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Michael F. Shaughnessy

- 1) Don, you have just released yet another book- could you tell our readers the title and what it is about?



Twitch the Squirrel and the Forbidden Bridge is my newest book, and it's fast-paced, action-packed and lots of fun. I love what Dave Allred, the illustrator, did with the pictures. They're like a combination of classic children's book illustrations and comic-book-style action. Twitch is the story of a talented daredevil of a squirrel who is overconfident about his abilities. When his parents forbid him to cross an old broken-down bridge across a dangerous ravine, he doesn't listen to them because he wants to get to the tree full of acorns on the other side. His motivations are good. He wants to help gather acorns for the family. But he learns an important lesson about respecting his parents' rules. But don't worry, there's a happy ending!

- 2) Now you have several other books out there- tell us about The Tortoise and the Hairpiece.

This story touches on issues of appearance and self-esteem. It can help parents start conversations with kids about appreciating their own uniqueness and how they don't have to be just like everybody else in order to be a valued person. Jake the Tortoise is worried none of the other animals will like him because he doesn't have hair like they do. So he decides to get some "hair" so he can fit in. But it doesn't quite work the way he had hoped. He learns that it's not necessarily his appearance that has to change, but when his attitude about it changes, he feels much happier. I once did a reading of this book at the children's cancer center of a local hospital to the patients and their siblings and families. The kids enjoyed the story, and the parents and staff really appreciated the message.

- 3) What are you trying to teach in some of your books?

It's true that most of my books feature a lesson or a theme. Superhero can be used to help kids realize that a real hero isn't someone who has super powers, but someone who helps someone else...even in ordinary ways. Shelby the Cat centers around themes of bullying and standing up to peer pressure.

But I like to think of my books as parenting tools, and they are written in a way that leaves a lot of room for a parent to identify certain areas of interest or lessons that they feel would be most helpful to THEIR particular child. That's why I include questions for discussion at the end of each book so parents can dig a little deeper and find out if their child needs help in certain areas. There is a local school counselor who loves to use my books with her students, and a group of children's therapists in New York that use them during sessions with great results because the books are so easily adaptable to each child's individual needs.

- 4) Now, who is Chipper the Clown and what are some of his adventures about?

Chipper is a man who followed his dreams and became a clown because he wanted to make people laugh. In his first adventure, he learns a very simple lesson about asking for help. In his second adventure, Chipper and the Unicycle, he travels the world, encountering clowns of a few different cultures as he looks for a new act. He decides on a unicycle, but it's not as easy as it looks! He clearly learned his lesson in the first book, because he

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takes the unicycle back to the store and asks for help. Now he learns the value of perseverance, and of being patient with himself and not expecting instant perfection when learning something new.

5) Tell us about "The Watch Cat "and if there is a lesson in the story somewhere.

Well, I am a cat-lover, and Watchcat is mostly an entertaining story that celebrates the differences between dogs and cats, and how this particular cat did a dog's job and became a hero simply by doing what he does best-being a cat. I think that with a little effort, parents and teachers could use this story to illustrate the idea that it's best just to be yourself and to enjoy the talents you were born with.

6) One of my favorites is The Higgledy-Piggledy Pigeon. Can you provide a synopsis?

This story is also one of my favorites. When I was young, I struggled with dyslexia in school. I didn't know I was dyslexic, and although I was bright and eager to learn, when I realized I had a hard time doing certain things that were really easy and basic for everyone else, I was stunned and discouraged. I wanted to show how Hank dealt with an equally stunning discovery and to show how a wonderful teacher made all the difference to him by showing him tools he could use to compensate for his difficulties. This book also celebrates that fact that everyone learns in different ways, and that we all have to figure out which ways work best for us individually.

7) I guess that you get a lot of questions as to where you get your ideas from-so instead, I will ask where you get your motivation from?

Well, you asked me earlier what I am trying to teach with my books. What I would like MOST for my books to teach is the unsurpassable value of parents and children spending time reading together and then TALKING about what they read. Numerous studies have shown that even more than the reading, it's the conversations about what has been read that help children most. It improves their language skills, reasoning skills, social skills, and many others. It's one of the best things that a parent can do for their child to give them a good start in learning and life. This is something I believe in strongly and it's what motivates me to write these books.

8) Now, can you tell us a bit about your next book?

Well, 2012 is going to be an exciting year because I'm working on a series of children's novels for grades 3 and up. The books are about a boy in the middle ages who is unexpectedly knighted. For the most part, he's an ordinary boy, but he has a very strong sense of justice and chivalry, which he needs, because due to a sad combination of circumstances, the kingdom is in a terrible state, and most of the grown-up knights have either given up or become the kind of knights that people would be afraid to meet in a dark alley.

9) Do you write specifically for children, and do you always have a message of sorts?

I do write for children. And their parents. I write for them as a unit, especially when I'm working on picture books. I do like to include a message, because it gives parents and children something to talk about. Usually the messages are not ground-breaking insights. They are just ordinary lessons everyone learns eventually. But sometimes the opportunity to talk about these messages is not easy to create, so I hope parents can use these stories to create opportunities for conversation.

10) What have I neglected to ask?

You have forgotten to ask about my blog. www.cardboardboxadventures.wordpress.com. Lately I've been posting odds and ends I've discovered as I work my way through my new novel with a medieval setting. I've learned a lot of things...including how to spell medieval correctly. But I'll be posting lots of items in the coming months about the development of the book and various characters and historical details I discover. And I often post references to articles and studies that illustrate the importance of reading and talking with kids, as well as tips and techniques for getting the most out of time spent reading together. There's also more information on my website www.donwinn.com.



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About Michael Shaughnessy EducationViews Senior Columnist

Dr. Shaughnessy Eastern New Mexico University Portales, New Mexico is currently Professor in Educational Studies and is a Consulting Editor for Gifted Education International and Educational Psychology Review. In addition, he writes for EducationViews.org and the International Journal of Theory and Research in Education. He has taught students with mental retardation, learning disabilities and gifted. He is on the Governor's Traumatic Brain Injury Advisory Council and the Gifted Education Advisory Board in New Mexico. He is also a school psychologist and conducts in-services and workshops on various topics.

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