

In children's books, pictures can paint a thousand words

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As anyone will tell you, love is complicated. But when should we share that reality with children — and how? Matt de la Peña's best-selling picture book "Love" has pushed these questions to the fore.



"Love" celebrates love — love between parent and child, love between siblings, self-love and, most dramatically, love lost. One image shows a family "nervously huddled around the TV," clearly taking in some scary news. In another arresting image, illustrator Loren Long depicts a boy hiding under a piano, being comforted by his dog. Above, two adults argue; a chair has been knocked over and a glass of liquor sits on the piano's edge. The text beneath it reads: "But it's not only stars that flame out, you discover. It's summers, too. And friendships. And people."

Before the book's publication, a major book buyer had threatened not to carry the book because of this scene. De la Peña and Long pushed back. The book buyer relented.

De la Peña feels strongly that children grappling with emotional difficulties should be able to see themselves in the books they read. "An uncomfortable number of children out there right now are crouched beneath a metaphorical piano," de la Peña wrote in *Time* last month, and it is vital that they know they are not alone.

As de la Peña tours the country promoting "Love," readers — of all ages — are coming out from underneath the metaphorical piano. Last week, for instance, a 50-yearold woman handed the author a note, which he later posted on Twitter, about how much the book meant to her:

"As a child, I never saw my experience in the sweet little picture books the librarians read to us or any of the happy endings deemed appropriate for young audiences. I can't imagine how different things would have been for me if I had a book like this with my feelings right there on the page."

In a phone interview from his home in Brooklyn, de la Peña — a Newbery Medalist whose previous books include "Last Stop on Market Street" and "Mexican WhiteBoy" — talked about the importance of honesty in children's books and why he chose, as he put it, "to push it all the way." This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How did you decide on the piano image?

A: It was Loren's decision. He first thought he'd illustrate my words by showing the death of a pet, and then he wandered into the idea of a friend moving away. Then he asked, "What if there's a domestic situation? Can we do that in a picture book?" I said, "Let's try." I think he nailed it. A teacher in Oklahoma told me that in presenting the piano image to three groups, he got three different re-

sponses: First-graders said the boy is playing hide-and-seek. Third-graders said the parents are having a fight. Fifthgraders said the parents are getting a divorce. When we present the book to kids, Loren and I are careful to point out that there's a lot of love in this picture: the dog, and that the parents love the child, too. Q: Who do you think is the audience for this book? A: It's a picture book. And yet, the more I read the book publicly, the more I wonder if I wrote a YA picture book. It has made me re-think my understanding of the picture book. Maybe they're not exclusively for 4-to-8-year-olds. It's like YA novels — are they really just for teens? Seventy percent of people who read them are adults. Q: In your Time essay you asked, "Is the job of the writer for the very young to tell the truth or preserve innocence?" How would you answer that now?

A: I think the response to the book has answered the question. It is to tell the truth. And then, of course, parents and teachers have to decide if they are going to use this particular tool to tell it. If they do, there are some interesting conversations that can hopefully arise. That's what literature is: a tool for people to feel things. Q: You have a 3-year-old daughter. How did she respond to "Love"?

A: When we read "Love" together, when we got to the piano page she slapped the page back down so she could read it longer. Next, she asked why the boy is sad. I let her guide the conversation. Q: What is a parent's role in reading books like yours?

A: The cool thing about literature for younger people is not just reading the text but experiencing the conversation with the parent or the teacher — that bonding experience. The book is a way for the parent and the child to communicate. Q: Are you the child under the piano?

A: My parents were teenagers when I was born. Poverty was the reason we were having struggles. I definitely had moments under the piano. Q: What do you hope people will take away from this book?

A: Not everything that happens is what we hope to have happen. Not everything is positive. Acknowledging that adversity exists is important — but also wrapping it in love. It's like the flu vaccination — you get a little taste of it so your body can be more resilient. A book can do that, too. If you know that sadness exists, maybe you will be more adept at handling that sadness in real life. I definitely had challenging moments in childhood, but I had a mom who was always there and was always supportive. That allows you to be even stronger. I hope people will just take a deep dive with me on all facets of love — both positive and negative.