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Bad children's books?

Joe Ferullo | Oct. 19, 2009 NCR Today

My wife is angry. She is telling everyone we know that she is angry. And she is angry because somebody is knocking her favorite children's books.

Now, I'm not talking about the books she read as a child -- when you become parents, your literary love moves from the books you read as a kid, to the books you read to your kids. And this is where the anger comes in.

In a new column called "Parenting on the Edge [1]," *Los Angeles Times*, writer Madeleine Brand talks about how bad some of the best-known children's books really are -- not bad for children, mind you, bad for parents. Brand's column picks out for special mention *The Rainbow Fish*, *The Runaway Bunny*, *Love You Forever*, and (this is the one that really set my wife off) *The Giving Tree*.

That's right: *The Giving Tree*. Apparently, the big thing wrong with *The Giving Tree* is that whole "giving" notion it seems to obsess on. You remember this: a tree and a boy grow up together, and the tree gives and gives of itself as the years go by, until it is nothing more than a stump -- which it happily offers to the boy-now-an-old-man as a place to rest upon. Writes Brand: "The tree says she's happy -- happy to be sat upon. What kind of message does that send to a child" about the value of parents?

All these books mentioned above have this theme in common: I, the parent, will always be there for you, no matter what. I give my life over to you. This makes Brand (and a children's book author she quotes, named Laurel Snyder) very upset, because the message these books send is that a parent's main purpose in life is the care of children. To which my mother, her mother, my mother-in-law, my father, my aunts and uncles in Yonkers, my sister in Tampa and a host of others would say: "Yes. And your point is?"

It seems that in Brand's version of *The Runaway Bunny, the mother would just stop answering her child's incessant and nagging questions about just how hard she would look for him if he ran away. She would tell the boy to please be quiet because mommy needs some "me time." InThe Giving Tree, the tree would stop after parting with just a branch or two. After all, everyone says those branches are tree's best features, and she'd be nothing without them.*

This is all part of a trend in writing about parenthood -- a focus on just what a royal pain it is to raise kids, and how it all really restricts what you can do with your day. Look, my wife and I have two girls; we get it. We drive them everywhere, go to all their school and sports meetings, work the fundraisers, help with the bake sales.

In fact, here is how much we get it: five days ago, we celebrated our 20th anniversary -- except we didn't. We had too much to do for the kids, so (just as in every previous year) we put our time off. We'll find the time eventually. But we won't.

We worry that we are too extreme, that we deny ourselves too much as a couple by spending too much time as parents. I'll admit: this skipping-our-20th-anniversary moment drove me crazy for a couple of days. In the end,

though, it was OK. We took the long view. This was the choice we made when we started a family and, if ancestry is any guide, it is the choice our girls will make when they have kids of their own.

As for Madeleine Brand and her column, all my wife could say as she tossed the newspaper aside was: "Wow. She must not be Catholic."

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[1] http://www.latimes.com/features/home/la-hm-brand17-2009oct17,0,7338869.story