
Reading *I Want My Hat Back* by Jon Klassen. Encounters over Seven Months: one child, one book, one adult

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ABSTRACT Jenifer Smith describes and reflects on seven months of sharing one book with a child who is coming at reading in her own way.

She's back again. This time she gasps at the rabbit in the hat – 'That naughty rabbit'; at the despairing bear – 'Poor bear, he wants his hat'; an almost ecstasy at the realisation and the crimson rage; then back, back as the bear races after the hat and its wearer. 'Oooh,' she says, 'that bear's eaten that rabbit.' Although it is not certain that she is entirely convinced.

Little Red is five years old. She is, like the pseudonym I have chosen, a feisty and independent child, though sometimes given to outbursts of rage and despair. She is the second of five children and comes to school a dramatic force. Little Red is one of a number of children in a small rural primary school with whom I have been sharing books. This is a story of the seven months during which she and I have shared multiple readings of a single book.

Bear has lost his hat and he really wants it back. He asks a series of animals, none of whom has seen his hat, though one of them is wearing it and the bear doesn't notice, despite or perhaps because of the rabbit's extravagant denial. When the deer asks what the hat looks like, bear realises that he *has* seen it and rushes back to find the hat-wearing rabbit. The final pages show the bear sitting on a scattering of twigs and leaves. He is wearing his hat. When the squirrel asks if he has seen a rabbit, his denial is as overstated as the rabbit's (Klassen, 2011).

February 2018: The children like it when we share a book. They like it better when they have an adult to themselves. Even one other child seems like an intrusion once we have begun. We have smoothed our hands over the bright cover. Maybe pointed out the title; scrutinised the illustrations there. One or

two pages turned and the child is leaning in, settling against my side. Little Red is waiting for her turn. She has chosen *I Want My Hat Back*, by Jon Klassen. She chose it last week and the week before. Now it is her favourite. She turns the pages and tells herself the story, calling out at moments of excitement to anyone who will look. She wants to share but she won't let go. The book is firmly in her grasp.

How did she arrive here? Two weeks ago, she brought the book for me to share with her. She did not want to hear all the words. I began to find a way of telling the bare bones of the story, referring to the pictures, but without the repetitive text. She didn't have much time for the language that I love. She was not ready to be held by the repeated phrases and the subtle shifts as each animal answers in its own way the bear's question, *Have you seen my hat?* The mole's answer, *What is a hat?*, passed her by. When we turned the page and a rabbit in a red pointy hat answers in a rush that proclaims his guilt, she was unmoved.

No. Why are you asking me?

I haven't seen it.

I haven't seen any hats anywhere.

I would not steal a hat.

Don't ask me any more questions.

The words tumble from his mouth and Little Red accepted what he says with the same equanimity exhibited by the bear. *OK. Thank you anyway.*

She turns the page and on we go, with hardly a pause, while I create a little stream of narrative: *'Have you seen my hat? He's still looking for his hat,'* quick and light, skipping one word after another. When Little Red turns to the page where the bear is lying down in despair, she strokes him with compassion. I affirm that he is feeling very sad. *'Poor bear,'* I say, as we gaze at the prone bear. *'He really is missing his hat.'* Then she is zipping through the pages until I make her pause. *'Wait.'* I read the deer's question: *What does it look like?* And the bear begins: *It's red and pointy...* It's a delicious moment of realisation. I enjoy it on every reading. Still, Little Red hasn't made the link. She turns the page again and there stands the bear, the whole page flooded with red. His anger. Then off he sets. A double-page line-up of the animals he has asked. Their eyes swivel right to follow him. He is running back. Turn the page. Another double-page spread. Close up. Rabbit with red pointy hat on the left. Bear, hatless, on the right-hand side. Eyes locked.

I turn to Little Red. *'Look at them. See how cross the bear is.'* I stare at her. I am the rabbit, she the bear. Our eyes lock. And she's quickly back to the book and over the page. There is the bear, sitting on the ground. His hat is on his head, a scattering of twigs and leaves beneath him.

Alone.

'Oh, he's sitting on the rabbit,' gasps Little Red.

She turns the page. Here is a squirrel. *Have you seen a rabbit wearing a hat?* he asks. The bear, just like the rabbit, rattles off his defensive reply.

No, why are you asking me?

I haven't seen him.

I haven't seen any rabbits anywhere.

I would not eat a rabbit.

Don't ask me any more questions.

OK, the squirrel replies, *thank you anyway.*

'Do you think he might have eaten the rabbit?' I ask. Her eyes widen. She thinks about it. She and I both allow that thought to sit awhile.

And there we are.

No. One more thing. Little Red turns the pages back to find the rabbit in the bear's red pointy hat. She jabs him with her finger and shakes her head. 'That rabbit.'

She must give way now to another child, but she may hold on to her book, her arms wrapped around it. Off she goes, a little way but not too far. She's there sitting at the table, turning the pages, jabbing her finger, shaking her head in admonishment. Even a single first reading of this text demands adjustments. All subsequent readings will hold differences of meaning. Little Red will find herself seeing more, be pulled in different directions. The three of us, me, Little Red and the author, will negotiate meanings, even as I work to stand back, I am also aware that I want to draw her attention to ways the text might work.

She's soon back by my side. Will I read the book again? Yes. This time, others gather round but she's in charge. This time, when we arrive at the hat-wearing rabbit, she shakes her head. 'That naughty rabbit.' Finger jabs. Turn the page. Turn the page. Here is the prone bear, deep in despair. Poor bear. She strokes him. Knows his sadness.

This time she anticipates the answer to the deer's question. *What does it look like?* 'Oh, oh,' she cries and quickly turns to the bear's scarlet rage. *I HAVE SEEN MY HAT.* 'Oh.' She turns the page again and runs her finger past the line of animals.

'Look how their eyes are all following him,' I say. My turn to run my finger along the line at eye height.

Then the rabbit and the bear, I the rabbit, she the bear, turn to face each other. Eyes locked.

Then on. There is the bear, the broken twigs.

'He's sitting on that rabbit,' she says.

And then the story's over. All done as far as she's concerned.

Little Red already has her own rituals when reading this book. She comments on the 'naughty rabbit', strokes the despairing bear, anticipates his moment of realisation. On each successive reading she adds to her repertoire of understanding and pleasure.

On the third week of my bringing a selection of books from which children may choose, she spots it in the pile. 'There's that bear book.' She is in agony lest someone else should take it. She is not the first to read with me, so she takes the book to read herself. She's calling out to anyone who'll listen. 'Look! Look!' She jabs the page at crucial moments, turning pages with an air of authority. The drama of it rises in her voice.

When she finally gets to share with me, she begins with the endpapers, first at the front, pointing out the drawings of animals, especially the rabbit and the bear. Then she turns to the back and shows me something I had *not* noticed before, that on these pages the bear is wearing his hat, the only splash of red on a monochrome design. No hats at all on the initial endpapers.

On this reading, Little Red once more has charge of the book and of how we will move through it. She has no time for the words. She turns the pages, following, acknowledging the bear's search. Hah, here's that naughty rabbit. 'Oooh!' She shakes her head.

Pages turn. Pages turn. Here is the prone bear. Here the point of realisation. 'Oh. Oh.' Such delight here for the reader who knows this secret. She turns back, page by page, to the rabbit in the red hat. 'There it is!' she cries. She turns forward again to the page of crimson rage. 'Oh,' she says. There is something wonderful about her grasp of the way Klassen has seeded this moment early in the book. It took her in the first time and now she turns back, as writers often invite us to do, to remember some kind of foreshadowing earlier in a narrative or to reassess our understanding in the light of new events.

She takes on the final sweep of the story: the bear's race back. Rabbit and bear. Eye to eye. We turn to face each other. And then the bear, sitting.

'He's eaten that rabbit.'

She shakes her head with satisfaction. She takes the book and hugs it to her. No mention is made in the book of any rabbit eating except in the bear's denial. Children may interpret stories in ways they are willing and ready for. Little Red will swing back and forth between eaten and sat on throughout her many readings. Is she exploring what it is to want to punish someone who has something one loves?

One beauty of these readings is the enjoyment of personal high points; the learning about them – the realisation of plot twists and slowly revealed secrets, then the anticipation and delight as we approach, for example, the moment when the truth dawns on the bear... and the way the illustrations reveal him running past all the animals he has already asked. How do these repeated readings help us both to better appreciate the book's complexities, its details, its subtle – and not-so-subtle – jokes? I am interested in the book's language, its handling of narrative structure, the power of pictures integrated into text. Little Red loves the drama of this story.

Soon after this, I moved on to work with other groups of children, but Little Red remained devoted to her book. It became common knowledge in the school that it was a book that was special to her. The red pointy hat even became a feature of a quiz on World Book Day.

In June, Little Red showed me a drawing she had made of the bear, matching it to the page she had copied it from – the one where the bear is lying down feeling sad. She pointed out how she has marked the bear's fur with small strokes of the pen in the same way that Jon Klassen has marked it. She wanted me to read to her there and then. She is prepared, now, to wait to hear all the words and likes the different animals. On this reading, she anticipated when the

rabbit will be on the next page. Although she repeated some words as I read, really what she wants is the drama. Through the drama of the readings, our re-enactments and her physical engagement with the page, she is learning the emotional subtext. It is through this book that she is learning that stories may mean something different and deeper from what they seem to mean at first. And that they are not entirely fixed. I am intrigued to know how she wrestles with her understandings of the bear's actions.

On three occasions in the next month I saw how this favoured book had become a source of great solace for her. Twice I came across her in a state of utter misery and despair. Each time, a reading of the book soothed her and shifted her mood. On the third occasion, an intense day at an outdoor activity centre brought about meltdown. In fact, as she often does, she lay down on the ground and screamed. Her teacher reported that when Little Red felt able to speak again she asked when I was coming to read to her. I have little doubt that she was thinking of her beloved hat book. Perhaps, at a deep level, Little Red recognises in herself some of the emotions of this narrative: her own impotent rage and despair; loss in the hurly-burly of a large family where maybe things are 'shared' despite their personal importance; the fury she might direct at the perpetrator. Even though she is ambivalent about the eating of the rabbit, the idea of it being squashed beneath the bear's large body, I feel, may well have its satisfactions.

She never refers to the book by its title. Once she had found there were two copies, she usually brought both of them with her, wanting me to read each of them. I ask myself, does she understand that they are identical? I am curious to know how she regards the words. I think she may know them all, but when I read her face is often turned towards mine rather than to the page. Perhaps one of our shared pleasures is the drama of this narrative. During one of our last readings we talked, again, about whether or not the bear has eaten the rabbit. 'Is the rabbit under there?' Little Red asks – indicating where the bear is sitting with broken twigs around him. I take her back to what the rabbit says. *I would not steal a hat.* Has he stolen a hat? Little Red knows he most definitely has. And the bear says, *I would not eat a rabbit.* What does she think? She shakes her head sadly. She thinks that the bear has eaten the rabbit. But we have had similar conversations before. It is hard to believe that the bear –whom we have grown to like and have sympathy for – would eat the rabbit.

Towards the end of the year, the seventh month of her relationship with the book, Little Red was at Writing Club after some end-of-day upset. I helped her and her friend make their folded books, taking the opportunity for quiet conversation. Little Red was not ready to write, so I read to her again. Afterwards, Little Red produced her cut-out bear. She made a drawing of the rabbit and cut that out and then cried in despair that she can't do it, that she can't write, that she can't draw. But her rabbit was lovely, I told her. I write 'rabbit', 'bear' and 'hat' for her, but she claims she can't do it. I make a folded pocket book so that she can slot the animals in the pockets. She asks me to draw the snake and then tells me it is no good. She is right, but she cuts it out

and then I draw all the animals, this time more accurately. She cuts them out and puts them in the pockets. As she realised that I was drawing all the animals for her she was overcome, almost as if couldn't believe what was happening to her. After such a long time of a seeming lack of interest in the words themselves, she is beginning to make them her own. She wrote 'rabbit' and 'bear', and cut those words out. She shuffled all the words into an envelope and hurried out to show her mother. I wonder how much she used her little book and whether anyone else was included in the narrative play?

During our many readings of this book Little Red rarely displayed any interest that I could detect in reading the text. In the end, I want her to be able to read this book and many others by herself. What was it that she was learning in all those shared and solitary encounters with the text?

Almost at the end of the summer term, her teacher told me of another encounter with the book. The teacher had chosen to read *I Want My Hat Back* to the class. Little Red called out so many words that she knew on each page that the teacher invited her to come and read to the class as other children do:

Little Red was reading some words but most pages were retelling. She knows the majority of the book without looking, however she did point to some words correctly as she said them. She read a few pages without me needing to help! And she was enjoying it so much that I let her go with it.

Little Red was very clear on the colour of words being the same as the animal who spoke them. We had been talking in class about speech punctuation and one of the children noticed that it doesn't say 'said bear'. Little Red pointed out to them that we know who said it because of the colours, so this was obviously something that she had really picked up on.

She asked the children what they thought happened at the end and she asked them for ideas first. She kept smiling and saying, 'I don't know what happened what do you think?' Another child suggested that he had been eaten and Little Red then offered the other options – 'He could be hiding behind the rock. Or the bear might be sitting on him.' She stayed neutral. At the end I asked what she thought and she said she thinks that he was eaten – she referred back to the point earlier in the story. She then said 'We don't know for definite though.' And she was happy for the others to have different opinions on what happened. She kept giggling and really enjoyed being the 'expert'.

I find with other books Little Red is reluctant to join in because she lacks confidence in her ability. She often says 'I can't read' and won't attempt any words. However, with this book because she has read it so many times and loves it, she was very willing to read it to the class. I feel that she will only 'take over' like Crystal does if she is really confident and it was lovely to see her do it on that day.

One of the things I love about this account is that although her teacher reported that Little Red spoke, almost as if in my voice, she has taken ownership of the book and how it might be read. Much of what she says here was not part of our shared readings (the colours, the hiding behind the rock, even the question of what had happened to the rabbit asked in that direct fashion). Little Red is coming at reading in her own way.

How are Little Red's successive readings of this book, alone, with me and with others, shaping her thinking and being, and her concepts of reading? This seems fundamental to her long-term identity as reader. How do we make space for the child, the book and the adult in the early years of school? How will Little Red's story unfold?

Reference

Klassen, Jon (2011) *I Want My Hat Back*. London: Walker Books.

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