



For all children, but maybe especially for those whose curiosity and imagination are squelched as often as nurtured, stories can swing open locked doors.

Drawing a Ring around the World

Tricia Springstubb

tricia.springstubb@gmail.com

It's easy to miss how our neighborhood has changed. The rambling old houses still work their charm. Magnanimous oaks still shade us in summer, and on winter evenings most windows burn with warm yellow light. We've lived here over thirty years, and when I turn down our street, I still sigh.

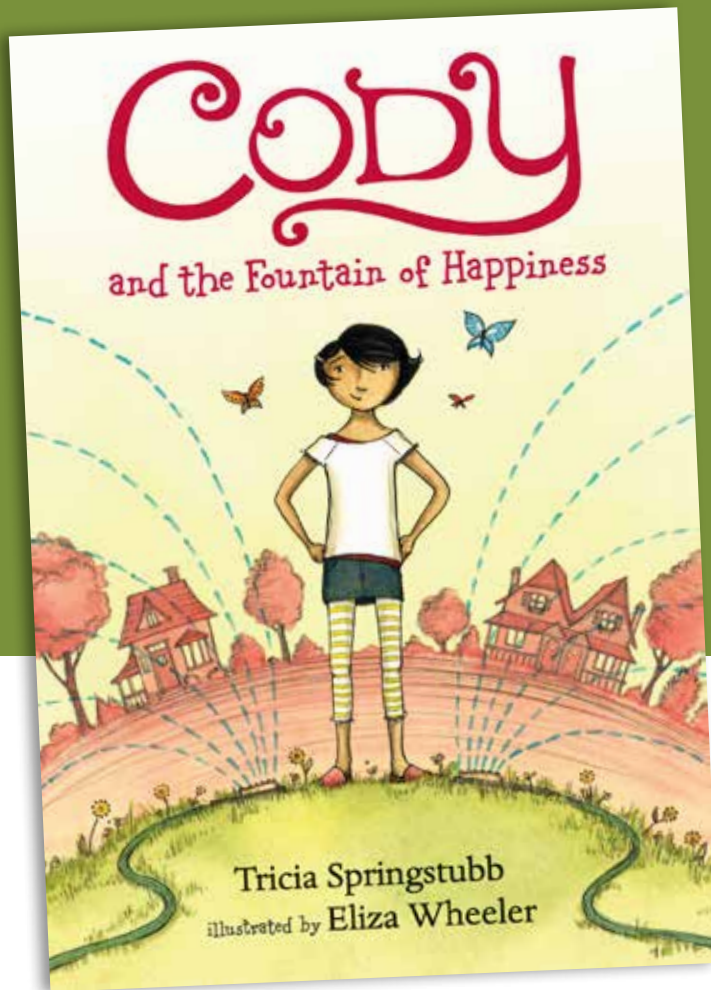
Still mostly with pleasure, but now with some sorrow, too. The house across the street from us steadily fell into such disrepair the city threatened to condemn it, and the extended family living there disappeared in the night. Another house a few doors down suffered a major fire. That family had to move in with relatives. They love their house, as does everyone on this street, and hope to restore it. Meanwhile, thieves have managed to strip every bit of copper pipe. The

school at the end of the block, the one our daughters walked to, closed a couple of years ago.

This is the street where they grew up, where they ran wild yet safe. My husband taught school in the next town over, another inner-ring suburb, and I've worked in the children's room of the local public library for many years. We know this place. So the Brookings Institute report that suburbs have become home to the country's largest, fastest-growing poor population was no surprise to us. Over the years, we've seen this once-stable world tilt, and families lose their footing. Things are especially rough here in the Rust Belt, but it's happening all over—vanishing jobs, foreclosures, bare food-pantry shelves, a rising drug problem.

I'll go out on a limb here and say that, while many people worry about this situation, those who work with kids worry a little harder. At the public library we see more and more children shouldering responsibilities and worries beyond their age. Small heroes—that's how I think of them. Most have even-younger siblings or cousins to look out for. They often stay in the library for hours on end, sneaking bags of chips behind the biographies, asking us for school supplies, falling asleep. Their parents are doing the best they can, but no one's guaranteeing what tomorrow will bring.

On top of it all, these kids—our kids—spend their days anxiously preparing and drilling for tests in “low performing” schools under the state gun. Reading for



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pleasure—reading fiction at all—has pretty much disappeared from their classrooms. At an age when life should brim with possibility, too many children live in worlds small and pinched.

“We don't want children to suffer,” Maurice Sendak once said. “But what do we do about the fact that they do?” (Setoodeh and Romano 2009).

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One morning not too long ago I sat at my writing desk, trying to work on my novel. The words weren't coming; the story had bogged down. A little fresh air, that's what I needed.

To my delight, I discovered someone had chalked a line on the sidewalk in front of our house. The line stretched as far as I could see, and of course I had to follow it. At first the chalk was yellow, but it soon gave way to blue, then pink, then green. The slate sidewalk was bumpy and cracked, but the line persevered. It skirted a puddle, got distracted by a squashed bug, hung a left at the corner, and kept on going. So did I. When at last I looked up, I found myself back outside my own house. Some child, some determined child, had lassoed my world! This made me grin. Drawing a ring around the known world—isn't that what I try to do when I write? Hurrying back inside, I got straight to work.

To know and be known—it's what we want from stories. When I write, I try to make my world my reader's,

too. Discovering that an author has spied into my heart—that she's felt just the way I do, been as afraid or surprised, thrilled or mortified—this is the gift I look for as a reader, and what I yearn to give as a writer. Stories make us less alone. They make us feel recognized and linked to something bigger. They can make us feel, *It will be all right*. A word that often comes up in reviews of my books is “comforting,” and the idea that children might find another home inside my pages makes me very happy.

Comfort and reassurance—these are fine things. But so is discovery. A book can take a child's hand and lead her outside that known circle, into new, dazzling places. For all children, but maybe especially for those whose curiosity and imagination are squelched as often as nurtured, stories can swing open locked doors. In his powerful memoir, *Black Boy*, Richard Wright wrote, “Whenever my environment had failed to support or nourish me, I had clutched at books... It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made

the look of the world different” (1966, 272–73).

Stories can whisper in a small ear, *This is what you might do someday. This is the kind of courage you can have, the kind of hero you can be.* Not long ago, neuroscientists proved what those of us who believe in stories already knew: reading good literature actually, physically, extends us. It’s the closest we can get to living another’s experience. The same synapses fire, the same parts of our brains light up as if we really were solving that mystery, scaling that wall, sharing that kiss (Paul 2012). The whoop of possibility, the heart-thump of hope—every child deserves this. I’m thinking of that great Bob Dylan song “Forever

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Young,” in which he wishes us all the chance to “build a ladder to the stars, and climb on every rung.”

We’ll never stop fretting over the things we can’t give our children. But we can offer something many of them don’t even know they want and need—stories about themselves, and about who they might become. Together we can write and share

the books that make today better, and tomorrow boundless. Here at my desk, I often look out over that bumpy sidewalk, across the street to that once-abandoned house. The city didn’t tear it down after all. Neighbors pitched in, bought it, and fixed it up, and now when I look up, my eye falls on that bright spot of communal hope. I smile to myself and get back to work.

Tricia Springstubb is the author of the award-winning novel *What Happened on Fox Street and its well-loved sequel, Mo Wren, Lost and Found*. She is also the author of the picture book *Phoebe & Digger*, illustrated by Jeff Newman. Her most recent books are *Moonpenny Island and Cody and the Fountain of Happiness*. Tricia has worked as a *Head Start teacher and a children’s librarian*. She is currently a full-time writer and also substitutes at her local library. She lives in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

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