



Patricia
Polacco

Junkyard Wonders

Written and illustrated by Patricia Polacco

Philomel, 2010, 48 pp.

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Tricia's hopes of a new start in a new school where no one knows she has dyslexia are dashed when she discovers she's been assigned to Room 206, the "junkyard" with other students with special needs. Jody Beach grows too fast, Gibbie McDonald has Tourette syndrome, Stuart Bean has diabetes, and Tomm has vision problems and likes ballet. Tricia is upset at first but, gradually, as she gets to know her classmates and her teacher, Mrs. Peterson, she becomes

comfortable in her classroom community. One day, though, after Barton Poole bullies Tricia and her friends, calling them "weirdos" and "retards," Mrs. Peterson works to change her students' perceptions. She explains that a junkyard is not a place for throwaways and things nobody wants, it is "a place full of wondrous possibilities!" She takes them to a real junkyard and has the children collect things they think they can turn into something new. A few weeks later the groups share their creations. When Tricia's group presents their model airplane, the class decides to raise money for a motor to make it fly. Jody proposes they name the plane the Junkyard Wonder "because we made it out of junk and because we Junkyard Wonders made it. That plane is us!" After some heart-breaking happenings, the class flies the plane and, in Gibbie's words, it goes, "straight to the moon."

This inspiring and touching story celebrates the uniqueness and genius in every child and the power of a talented and insightful teacher to draw that out and help the child and those in the surrounding community know and appreciate it. While the story is complex in places, the characters are endearing and authentic and the story is riveting and believable. The detailed pencil and marker illustrations are recognizably Polacco's. The expressive faces portray a range of emotions the children feel, from sad to fearful to broken-hearted to joyous, as well as the dedication and passion of Mrs. Peterson.

Polacco based the story on events in her childhood. Diagnosed with dyslexia as a child, she had difficulty learning to read and spent time in special education classrooms. When she entered the "junkyard" with Mrs. Peterson and her classmates, she came to appreciate her own and others' talents and strengths and understand the meaning of true genius. An appended end note provides information about the remarkable and successful lives of her close friends in the junkyard.

Junkyard Wonders would work well in a text set with books about extraordinary teachers helping students find their "genius." These books might include *Thank You, Mr. Falker* (Patricia Polacco, 1998) and *Once Upon an Ordinary School Day* (Colin McNaughton, 2005). In a text set on being smart and creative, it could be paired with

Odd Boy Out: Young Albert Einstein (Don Brown, 2004) and *How We Are Smart* (W. Nikola-Lisa, 2009).

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