



THE OMNIPRESENCE OF JUNIE B. JONES

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE REVISIT THE STORIES WE ONCE LIVED BY?

WORDS BY SIERRA RILEY | ART BY REBEKAH MAURICE



I've been thinking a lot about childhood lately. I guess it began last December in Toronto when my parents gave my sister and me digitized copies of old family videos. With this gift, we could summon the ghosts of Christmas past. I packed the USB stick carefully between sweaters, a precious jewel in my suitcase.

Shortly after returning to Vancouver, I spent a night immersed in scenes from my own small history. Pressing play turned my TV into a time machine. Each file, an uncut selection of milestones from the '90s, expanded my temporality, brushing the dust off of another memory: "Nonna cooking xmas eve fish dinner.mp4", "Sierra's 4th bday.mp4", "Bianca first day at school.mp4". There was my family, so young, light, and fresh. And there I was.

Through a veil of static, I watched mini-me: a small, curly-haired girl ferociously immovable in her dislikes and devotions, crossing her arms, sporting a Calliou backpack big enough to fit her inside. Immediately, I recognized in myself an unfettered imagination, a refusal to be understood, and a stubborn curiosity. I then considered the provenance of these parts of my personality. Were they genetically coded or learned somewhere along the way? If the latter, where were they learned from?

Once every tape had been watched, I had an enduring itch to turn over more old leaves. The timing was auspicious for such a project; I'd recently quit my nine-to-five job in the content mill. Liberated from the weight of hours spent on the clock, I dedicated my now-vacant mornings to reawakening my sense of play from its slumber. My updated 7 a.m. ritual is not dissimilar to a child's: I eat cereal, watch cartoons, and collect shells on the seashore. Of course, there are a few age-appropriate modifications, including black coffee, the NYT crossword, and scrolls through social media.

A favourite Instagram account of mine is @myoldbooks. Run by a "book finder," the account connects followers with the stories they read as children. "I'm looking for a book from the '80s or '90s about a boy who is maybe cursed by a magic fairy, turns into a slug, has an adventure in his garden," one follower writes. "There's a memory of an illustration of the boy squeezing out of a toothpaste tube."

The popularity of this little service is both endearing and unsurprising to me; stories are, after all, the compass with which we navigate our physical landscapes and spiritual territories.

Like any young person raised on Scholastic and Nickelodeon, I handpicked traits from popular characters like cherries off of trees. This mission to resurrect the palaces of my youth—and chase the memories @myoldbooks unlocked—led me to the library stacks. Though it didn't take me as long to get through the stories as it did when I was at a grade-two reading level, I still found myself relating to the protagonists. Eloise, Junie B. Jones, Ramona Quimby, Violet

Baudelaire, Dorothy Gale. Sharply intelligent, kind, spunky and occasionally self-indulgent, these are girls with big feelings and big ideas. Just like me.

In *Junie B. Jones and a Little Monkey Business* by Barbara Park, the titular character is confronted with a sudden, life-altering change: her mother is pregnant and she'll soon be an older sister. Less than thrilled with the news, Junie B. acts like a total brat. She calls people names and talks back to authority figures—not to mention, she's got a very loose grasp on grammar. These character flaws are the reasons why many parents banned Park's books from their homes in the early aughts. In fact, the American Library Association named Park among Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and John Steinbeck in a 2004 list of the 10 most frequently challenged authors.

"I knew [Junie B. would] make mistakes in every area of her life, socially and grammatically, and that'd be O.K.," Park said in an interview with the *New York Times*. "All of my characters are less than perfect. I find the term 'perfect child' to be an oxymoron." And maybe that's exactly what drew me to Junie B., Ramona, Eloise and the rest. Like them, I had often been perceived as "too much." It seems no coincidence that I gravitated towards stories with heroines who were adored despite—or even because of—their brashness.

After rereading each book, I went to mark my progress on Goodreads, where I found a particularly poignant review of *Ramona Quimby Age 8* written by user Sophie Crane. "This book is so fun and interesting. You learn a lot about Ramona and her family. It is also so easy and hard to read at the same time, like it has really good details about Ramona like how she felt [...] Also in some parts when you read the author Beverly Cleary tries to make you think about what's happening and see if you could picture the scene in your head cus then, for me it helps me understand a lot more what's happening. I actually love this book is good for adults and children [...] I am a child and I love it so I think a lot of other people will like it so please buy this book and read it ENJOY!"

For the rest of her life (and prospective career as a salesperson), Sophie Crane will probably remember how Cleary made her think and imagine and feel—or, the book might fade into a hazy assortment of images, like the dreamy descriptions from nostalgic readers on @myoldbooks. Either way, *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* has made an indelible mark on that kid. That's the magic of a good book.

My childhood heroes have come back to me at a special time. It's right now, at this break in my career, that I can reimagine, rediscover, and reinvent. As in youth, I'm becoming myself every day. Sure, I've matured since the age of eight, my books are a little thicker and I no longer fit in that Caillou backpack, but the heart of me is the same, really.