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November 1, 1981

Children's Books

RAMONA QUIMBY, AGE 8 By Beverly Cleary. Illustrated by Alan Tiegreen. 190 pp. New York: William Morrow & Co. \$7.95. (Ages 8 to 11) By NATALIE BABBITT

It is no small thing to have one's 25th book published, and that's what Beverly Cleary's new story about Ramona Quimby represents. Even better, Mrs. Cleary has won a whole closet full of awards since her first book was published in 1950. And even better than that, 25 of those awards came to her in statewide contests where the voters were young readers. This last seems especially significant. It is a rare thing to be hailed by audience and critics alike. In our field, children do occasionally take up a writer critics have spurned; this was the case, for instance, with L. Frank Baum's Oz stories. More often, children spurn writers that critics have taken up. But in Mrs. Cleary's case, everyone seems delighted.

The new "Ramona" is much like its predecessors. The language is relatively uncomplicated - though by no means simple - and the story blends comedy and tragedy as it builds to a happy ending that is not a sweep of the wand but rather a coming to terms with things as they are. Mrs. Cleary's popularity surely gives the lie to both of the common assumptions that children are, on the one hand, jaded and street-wise or, on the other hand, dear little bundles of innocence. For "Ramona Quimby, Age 8" lives in a real world of financial woes, arguing parents, sibling rivalries and school anxieties, including that deepest of all humiliations, throwing up in class.

But Ramona also lives in the equally real world of school success, closeness with a sibling and loving parents. In other words, it's an everyday world full of ups and downs that finally - if only temporarily - find their balance.

Part of the secret of Mrs. Cleary's success with her readers is surely that she very seldom slides into the role of Amused Observer; she manages instead to see things exclusively through Ramona's eyes - no mean feat. A lot of the time, in books for young children, the writer-as-adult seems not to be able to resist raising an eyebrow here and there, or hiding a smile. Children pick that up, and must laugh with the author at the hero rather than identifying. When that happens, the heart of the story is lost.

This Ramona story is mainly episodic. There is no unifying problem as there was in "Ramona and Her Father," where Mr. Quimby lost his job and had a hard time finding another. Instead, the episodes are held together by the simple business of Ramona's being in the third grade and

being especially sensitive to difficulties both at school and at home. It's a relief to find that these difficulties are average rather than bizarre, that a story about a pleasant, normal young WASP is still O.K. It all says something reassuring - to me, at least - about the state of the Union's grade-schoolers. A great many writers seem to believe that only a cup of hemlock can catch their interest. How nice to find, instead, that a glass of milk is as popular as ever.

I don't understand why Alan Tiegreen draws children's faces as cartoons while adults are given real faces. But that one problem aside, the illustrations are delightful and suit the text admirably. Mrs. Cleary's many fans will be happy with this new book, and I hope she goes on to give them 25 more.

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