



Priscilla Gilman

The Anti-Romantic Child
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Q: Tell us about *The Anti-Romantic Child*:

A: I've written a memoir about my experience raising my older son, Benj, who was diagnosed with a variety of special needs including a rare disorder called hyperlexia when he was around three years old. It's about how Benj rebuffed and defied every expectation I'd had about children and parenting but ultimately both restored me to my essential self and profoundly changed me and my life for the better.

It's a book about loss—all sorts of loss, literal and figurative—the loss of my nuclear family when I was 10, the loss of ideals and dreams, the loss of my father when my parents split and again to cancer, the loss of my romantic vision of childhood, the loss of my marriage, the loss of my career plan and my dream for my child's future. But it's also and more importantly about recovery, redemption, and recompense. My editor once said, "The book isn't only about a special needs child or even parenting per se but rather about the curve balls thrown by life and how we respond to them," and I think that's a pretty good summary!

Q: Can you explain the subtitle of your memoir, "A Story of Unexpected Joy?"

A: The phrase "unexpected joy" resonates for me in a whole variety of ways. First, it alludes to the way that my experience with Benj forced me to reevaluate my expectations about children and parenting and taught me how to get beyond the need to fulfill others' expectations of me. I had expectations for what parenting was going to be like and what my child was going to be like based on my own childhood and my own study and teaching of the great Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who celebrates imaginative, intrepid, playful children. I was a very creative, playful, artistic child, and I was so looking forward to giving my children a magical and romantic childhood in a secure, loving family. And in fact my life turned out to be in many ways the opposite of what I'd planned—I'm not an English professor anymore, I'm not married any longer, I have two boys who are very different from what I was expecting my children to be, and my life is so much greater and better than I could ever have possibly imagined.

Moreover, Benj has taught me that the sources of joy are wide and varied. He finds joy in unexpected places and the joy I get from parenting him often comes from unanticipated moments; he's reminded me to find joy in seemingly simple things and in surprising ways; he's inspired me to honor and celebrate what Virginia Woolf called "little daily miracles."

Q: In the same way that Joan Didion's *Year of Magical Thinking* resonated with readers on a universal level, readers of *The Anti-Romantic Child* seem to have an innate connection to your book as well. Why do you imagine that is?

A: While I would never presume to compare myself to Joan Didion, I have been gratified and heartened by the enthusiastic response to my book from such a wide variety of people: old and young, gay and straight, married and single, parents and non-parents. Perhaps it's because everyone can relate to the idea of having a dream dashed and the struggle to find meaning and purpose in a changed landscape. Moreover, given that my book celebrates uniqueness and argues passionately for respecting difference and creating the possibility of understanding and connection between ostensibly very different people, I suppose it makes sense that it might appeal to a broad range of individuals!

Q: As parents we often try to protect our children and to hide imperfections from the outside world. Why did you decide to share yours?

A: Writing the book for me was on one level an act of advocacy on Benj's behalf, so in that sense it's actually a fiercely protective act. I hope that anyone who reads this book will know and appreciate and understand Benj so much better than they otherwise would. They'll know just how far he's come and what a brave, determined, resourceful, and admirable person he is. They'll be better able to support and teach and love him. And at the same time, by sharing the story of my imperfect life, I hope I can reassure and encourage others. A large theme of my book is overcoming the need to be or appear perfect, to fulfill others' expectations of us as the perfect child, student, spouse, employee, parent.

I'd also had no experience with anything like this in my family and didn't know many people who had, so when I began speaking to parents, daycare providers, and teachers at early childhood conferences and events, I found myself gaining great satisfaction from sharing my experiences. I hope to offer fellowship, ideas and resources, empathy and comfort to others in similar situations. Writing the book for me was not only about writing a love letter to my son but also a way of reaching out to other people and other families who've experienced any kind of disappointment or dramatic change in circumstance— it doesn't have to be that they have a special needs child—but some change has occurred, some loss or disappointment or challenge, and I wanted to help show them how to cope, and how to move on, and how to look at that experience and take good things from it.

Q: What would you say to someone facing similar challenges with a child?

A: Don't compare your child to other children and your parenting experience to that of other parents; try to let go of the hopes and expectations you once had for your child and yourself as a parent and allow yourself to hope and dream in a new and richer way; let go of your need to predict the outcome and your tendency to make assumptions about what your child will or won't be able to do; live in the moment and really embrace it; take your child on his or her own terms and open yourself to the child in all his complexity and mystery and beauty; use his or her strengths to address weaknesses; celebrate each and every step of progress, however small it might seem; know that there are so many resources out there for people in your situation and that on this journey with your child, you will meet incredible human beings and learn so much about compassion, courage, generosity, and love.

Most important, I'd say to remember that out of challenge and difficulty and struggle can come our greatest growth, fulfillment, and joy.

Q: What do you believe literature can bring to your life? Why is the writing of Wordsworth so important to you?

A: The writer who was the most comforting and the most inspirational to me while I was going through this experience with Benj was

William Wordsworth. Wordsworth is the great poet of childhood and of loss; I'd fallen in love with him as a college student, and went on to write my senior thesis and part of my dissertation on him. I studied him, taught him, wrote about him, but I never really understood his poetry in a deep way until my experience with Benjamin. So in a way the book is also about how we may study something, we may teach it, it may be part of our work life, it may be something that we feel we've mastered in some way, but it means so much more once we have lived it. In the words of another great romantic poet, John Keats, "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced; even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it."

Wordsworth's idea of "abundant recompense" that out of disappointment or the thwarting of one's wishes and desires can come great gain, that suffering and loss can enable growth and wisdom is a crucial aspect of his poetry that sustained and inspired me in my own life. Wordsworth's iconic "for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense" is one of my book's leitmotifs and I refer to paradise lost at numerous points; the loss of an ideal, the unmooring loss of my dream of familial life is the crux of my narrative, the starting point from which I ultimately find redemption, John Milton's "paradise within . . . happier far."

At the same time as my story stands as a criticism of the way literature is currently discussed and taught in our colleges and universities, I hope it will also show how high-level literary study, reading the great authors, and serious thinking about these canonical texts enriches a life. My book makes a passionate argument for the continued relevance of one great poet, and poetry more generally, to our lives today. On one level, my book is about how books and poems and writers can inspire and support us, offer us solace and comfort, insight and solidarity. Many books and poems served as galvanizing and consoling guides and resources for me during my experience, and I wanted to write a book that could do for others what so many books and writers had done for me.

Q: Romanticism celebrates individuality, so in that sense it seems that this story both about Benj's unconventionality and attraction to solitude and your rejecting all sorts of societal expectations is a very Romantic one.

A: Yes, that's absolutely true. Benj put me in touch with the deepest kind of Romanticism- its respect for and celebration of individuality and unconventional people, its valorization of "the bliss of solitude," its emphasis on personal experience, emotion, freshness of perception over and against received truths, reason, traditional modes of judgment and evaluation

Q: Tell us about a recent moment of unexpected joy with Benj.

A: Recently, Benj and I have been working on a duet of Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game," a song I sang to him when he was a baby. It's hard not to tear up while singing it with him! His last words before sleep a few weeks ago were: "Mommy, let's always have new dreams, maybe better dreams and plenty!" A few weeks ago, his school had an evening co-ed dance, and although he was nervous going into it, after it was over, he emerged from the gym with a huge smile and said: "It was awesome! I wish I could re-live tonight!" It's always Benj's own moments of appreciation of and deep pleasure in his experiences that are the most satisfying for me.

Q: What do you hope your book can do as far as educating people so diagnoses and therapies improve?

A: When I first realized that Benj had hyperlexia, the entire world of special needs kids was utterly foreign to me. I'd thought of autistic children as non-verbal, unsmiling, flapping their hands or banging their head against a wall. In the almost ten years since I first realized Benj had hyperlexia, there's been an explosion of media coverage of the whole range of autistic spectrum disorders and there are now many more schools and programs for ASD and learning disabled kids. I certainly hope that my book can help parents in finding better therapies and obtaining more accurate diagnoses, but only if those diagnoses are the gateway to more effective and embracing care for the child. And I also and just as importantly hope that my book can contribute to a greater societal understanding of and support for people who are "different."

Q: Lastly, tell me about the gifts that this child has given you in your life.

A: Because of my experience with Benj, I've largely overcome perfectionism and the need to fulfill others' expectations of me; I have a much greater tolerance of uncertainty; I live much more in the moment and care much less about what others think; I'm more adventurous and creative, less judgmental and fearful, more open-minded and appreciative of difference, diversity, individuality. Benj has taught me about the importance of developing a supple and open mind with respect to our children but also with respect to our relationship with any person whose otherness is at first disorienting, and my experience with him has shown me how situations and events first experienced as losses or disappointments can ultimately inspire and uplift us in surprising and beautiful ways. But perhaps the best way of describing what Benj has given me comes from Wordsworth:

[He] gave me eyes, . . . [he] gave me ears;
And humble cares, and delicate fears;
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;
And love, and thought, and joy.
--Wordsworth, "The Sparrow's Nest"