



Two Children Tell: Ramona and Rebecca

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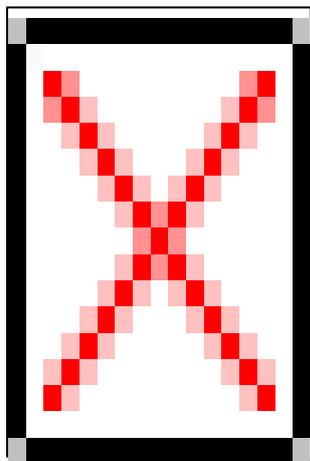
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Byline:

Beverly Cleary's heroine inspires Rebecca

Beverly Cleary celebrated her 100th birthday on 12 April 2016. To mark the occasion Virginia Lowe considers her daughter Rebecca's response to Cleary's Ramona stories.



Ramona could make an amazing number of things with paper, crayons, staples and scotch tape.

V: Who does that remind you of? R: Me! (with a grin, at five years nine months or 5y9m).

I had chosen **Ramona the Pest**, for Rebecca at the library, telling her the second chapter was about 'Show and Tell', the wonders of which she was just coming to terms with, in her first year at school at 5y6m. So much else was familiar too - the game of Grey Goose (though they called it something else), 'seat work', crossing out pictures that didn't start with the same letter, drawing with crayons and especially the story Ramona heard the first day - **Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel** (Virginia Lee Burton). As we read the first chapter that night, little brother Nick was passing. He stopped to peer at the page on hearing reference to one of his favourites, surprised rather than puzzled at 2y4m;

N: No **Mike Mulligan** in dere!?

Like Ramona's class, Rebecca said she had wondered how Mike went to the toilet. There was so much in Ramona's first year of school which resonated with Rebecca.

Rebecca was a very 'making' child, like Ramona. My level of housework was very basic. If it were a week since the last clean-up, there could be several layers of projects on the sunroom floor (well, I was keeping the record of their book contacts, wasn't I? That had to come first?). In the week, Rebecca might have gone from making little paper boxes to drawing her own version of books, to cutting out pictures for her alphabet scrap book, to making paper doll clothes, etc.

It was this aspect of Ramona's character which influenced Rebecca the most. As soon as a creation of Ramona's was mentioned, Rebecca started thinking how she would make it. Paper slippers? Paper Jack-O-Lanterns attached to the windows? Masks? Stuffed owls? Dress ups? (she insisted on creating a Little Match Girl costume all by herself, at

6y3m). It all spoke immediately to her, and as soon as the reading session was over she was off to her pencils, scissors, stapler in order to copy Ramona (though her way of doing it was 'better' of course, to her eyes anyway).

We very shortly afterwards read the other Ramona titles, and followed Ramona through her various iterations ' **The Brave, and her Mother; and her Father**; and various of the ones about **Henry Huggins**, which interweave with them. We continued to acquire or borrow new Cleary titles for the next six years. Another Cleary which made a deep impression was **Socks** ' which coincidentally was the name Rebecca had given to the kitten we had just acquired.

But basically it was constructions and games which appealed to her. The noisy dirty 'brick factory' which both Ramona and Cleary herself indulged in, appealed to Rebecca at once. For different reasons, so did the game Beezus played with/on Ramona. 'Why don't you play waiting for the bus?' she asked Nick in the sandpit with her one day. This game involved Ramona sitting really still and quiet. She thought it was great fun, and her big sister Beezus was careful not to disillusion her ' it suited her to keep the little Ramona quiet, as it would doubtless have suited Rebecca to keep Nick quiet and still, if it had worked. (By now we had moved on to another title, **Henry and Beezus**).

Even though, when Rebecca was younger, quotes from her books were a major way of understanding the world, by now there was very little new vocabulary in Cleary for her, except explanation of a few Americanisms ' crayons/coloured pencils, bathroom/toilet, kindergarten/prep. A few chants and sayings ' 'Ramona Geraldine Quimby, be quiet' she'd yell at Nick, or 'Jeezus Beezus' or 'boing, boing' as she pulled at his curls (accompanied by cross cries, just as from Susan in the story when her ringlets were 'boing-ed?.)

Interestingly **Pest** was one of the first chapter books each read alone. Rebecca was 7y7m when her teacher, noting how bored and frustrated she was with the classroom readers, suggested she move on to novels. Nick read it at 7y9m, (by now at a traditional school) remarking to me when he finished

N: I liked the last chapter best. She gets that letter. You know, she gets into trouble. I feel like that you know. I get into trouble like her. I know how she feels.

Then there were the ones about the mouse Ralph. Rebecca enjoyed these at 5y11m ' she was particularly fond of mice. Nicholas was only 2y8m but enjoyed them too ' the mouse's use of the toy motorcycle really appealed. **Runaway Ralph** and **The Mouse and the Motorcycle** were favourites. Ramona never resonated with him in the same way she did with Rebecca, mainly because he was not a constructor as she had been but Beverly Cleary spoke to both children, and was an important part in both their lives

Dr. Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids? Book](#) [3], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

Ramona The Brave, Ramona and her Mother, Ramona and her Father as well as **Runaway Ralph, The Mouse and the Motorcycle** and the **Henry Huggins** books are published by HarperCollins US and available from Amazon.

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