

We ask, O Lord, not to be freed from the stress of living, but to receive the encouragement of our faith and of our fellow travelers on the journey of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Other News This Week

'Living Legend' Beverly Cleary, Author of Books Portraying Children's Lives Realistically, Remembered with Affection

In the News

Beloved children's literature author, Beverly Cleary, who created the Ramona Quimby and Henry Huggins characters, died March 25 in Carmel Valley, California, at the age of 104. Her publisher, HarperCollins, gave no cause of death.

Over the years, Cleary earned many awards for her work, including the prestigious Newbery Medal and Honor Book designation, the National Book Award, and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. The Library of Congress named Cleary a Living Legend in honor of her contributions to children's literature.

To date, 85 million copies of Cleary's books have been sold in 29 languages. The books realistically portray the quirks, delights and frustrations of ordinary children.

In the 1940s, when Cleary was a children's librarian in Portland, Oregon, boys demanded to know where they could find books about kids like them. When she couldn't think of any, she decided she'd have to write some. And her first manuscript, *Henry Huggins*, about an imaginary boy who lived on Klickitat Street in Portland, was born.

"I think children like to find themselves in books," Cleary explained.

In some ways, Cleary's stories mirrored her own childhood with its delights and challenges. She spent her early years on a farm in Yamhill, Oregon, in a tiny town without a library until her mother opened one.

Financial troubles led the family to move to Portland, where she was placed in the slow readers' group because she pronounced the word "city" as "kitty." Determined to overcome that humiliation, she surrounded herself with books and taught herself to read by the third grade. She set a goal that one day she would write books she wanted to read but couldn't find in the library.

Cleary created some of the most memorable characters in children's literature: Ellen Tebbits, Otis Spofford, Henry Huggins' dog Ribsby, Ralph S. Mouse, Socks the cat, and Beezus and Ramona Quimby, the minor character who ended up stealing the show in the end.

"Millions of girls saw themselves in Ramona Quimby," tweeted First Lady and educator Jill Biden last Friday, when she heard that Cleary had died.

"It was easy for me to relate to Ramona Quimby because she looked like me," remarked TWW writer Joanna Loucky-Ramsey. "But I also related to the way she sometimes felt, like a misfit or an ugly duckling in a world of swans."

African-American author and librarian Dhonielle Clayton said that when she was 8 years old, she could relate to Ramona, a white girl, because "she spoke her mind and was a little rebellious. ... she pushed boundaries [and] ... was so revolutionary."

Ana Mari Cauce, president of the University of Washington, was born in Cuba but was brought to the United States at the age of 3. Cleary's books were her first introduction to reading, as a way to improve her English.

"In many ways, they were my introduction to this country," Cauce commented. The administrator also saw herself in Ramona, who, with her dark hair, Cauce said could have been Cuban. "In most U.S. books, the kids have blond hair," she said. "These were kids that looked like us."

In its tribute to Cleary, *The Washington Post* described Ramona as "a real girl suffering the real problems of childhood, in all of their smallness and their enormity." She was a strong female character before such roles were generally fashionable or accessible.

In a 2011 interview, Cleary said she thought children liked Ramona because she never learned "to become a better girl ... and she never reformed. ... She had a lot of imagination."

According to a LitHub analysis of the character from a few years ago, "Ramona loves the world with ferocity; she does not so much want to disturb it as she yearns to discover, to turn it over, examine every piece and crook and marvel at why each creature, commodity and substance exists the way it does."

"She was not a slowpoke grown-up," Cleary wrote in *Ramona and Her Mother*. "She was a girl who could not wait. Life was so interesting she had to find out what happened next."

Unfortunately, Ramona's irrepressible curiosity frequently got her into trouble. But that is why millions of children around the world could relate to her so well: Their lives were not perfect, either, no matter how much they tried to make things come out right.

Tracy Dockray, who illustrated Cleary's books, liked the fact that Ramona was "flawed."

In Cleary's book, *Ramona the Brave*, the 6-year-old protagonist dissolves in tears after receiving a less-than-complimentary midyear progress report from her first-grade teacher. When her mother tries to console her, asking "What are we going to do with you?" the girl exclaims, "Love me!"

"I think the emotions of children don't change. Their life situations change, but inside, they're just like they always were," Cleary said. "They want a home, they want parents that love them, they want friends, they want teachers that they like. I think that's rather universal."

Ramona voiced what children everywhere have thought at one time or another: that they don't fit in, that no one understands them, that they can never be like fairy-tale princesses or knights in shining armor, but they still need to be loved, not for who they are not or for who people think they should be, but for who they are.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Beverly Cleary Taught Girls to Make a Brave Demand: Love Me for How I Am. *The Washington Post*](#)

[Children's Author Beverly Cleary, Creator of *Ramona Quimby*, Dies at 104. *NPR*](#)

[Beverly Cleary Wrote About Real Life, and Her Readers Loved Her for It. *The New York Times*](#)

[The World of Beverly Cleary. *Beverlycleary*](#)

[Beverly Cleary, Age 100. *The New Yorker*](#)

Applying the News Story

Beverly Cleary's books for children have never gone out of print for a reason: She honored the important ordinary "non-events" in the lives of children, the loss of a tooth, learning to spell, getting a letter from one's kindergarten teacher. Cleary's authentic characters encouraged children to be themselves, to love and accept themselves and to learn from their mistakes. In this lesson, we explore what the Bible teaches us about the lavish love of God that makes it possible for people of all ages to accept and love themselves and others, flaws and all.

The Big Questions

1. What characters, if any, did you most relate to in literature or movies when you were growing up? What character traits, if any, did you see in them that you found in yourself?
2. What expectations did you feel obligated but unable to meet when you were young? Where did those expectations originate? When you did not meet them, how did you react?
3. What do you wish adults and other children understood about you when you were young?
4. How can the church best communicate the abundant love of God to children and young people? To adults?

5. What biblical texts, if any, do you turn to when you need assurance of the bountiful love of God? What other literature or cultural resources can you think of that reinforce that message that God loves us lavishly, without hesitation or reservation?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Song of Solomon 4:7

*You are altogether beautiful, my love;
there is no flaw in you.* (For context, read 4:1-7.)

The Song of Solomon ranks high in the canon of romance literature. The book describes the courtship of a handsome prince and his bride in glowing terms.

Ramona Quimby probably never dreamed that she would ever be called "altogether beautiful," let alone flawless! How many children measure themselves by cultural or societal standards that are virtually impossible for most humans to meet! And all too often, we carry those unrealistic expectations into adulthood, striving to be or become some ideal we were never intended to be, rather than to be the best person God intended us to be, true to our own unique identity.

Questions: What standards did you feel were beyond your ability to meet, either in the past, or in the present? Who set those standards? Why were you unable or disinclined to meet those standards? To what extent is it important to you to satisfy the desires, expectations or standards of others? When that is impossible, how do other people relate to you? How do you handle the realization that you have not met their standards?

Ecclesiastes 11:9

Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. (For context, read 11:7-10 and 12:1-8.)

The writer of Ecclesiastes chased after all kinds of pleasures and dreams, but in the end seemed to settle for the simple joys of life, for realistic, practical and achievable goals.

In chapter 12, the writer points out that we should take our joys wherever we find them, because as we age, and as the problems of life overtake us, we are likely to experience loss and frustration.

Ramona Quimby definitely wanted to squeeze every ounce of joy out of every single day that she could. The writer of Ecclesiastes advocates that we should all do the same, with the one caveat that "for all these things God will bring you into judgment." So, enjoy yourselves, but exercise wisdom while you do so.

Questions: How do you balance the pursuit of pleasure, the inclination of the heart and the desire of the eyes, with the exercise of wisdom? Give a practical example of how you might do this.

Luke 2:46-50

After three days [Mary and Joseph] found [Jesus] in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. (For context, read 2:40-52.)

As Jesus progressed from childhood to adulthood, he grew in physical strength, mental acuity and the favor of God and people.

On at least one occasion, his behavior perplexed his parents. When Jesus was 12 years old, the family went up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. When it was time to leave, Jesus stayed behind to spend more time with the teachers in the temple, but he neglected to tell Mary and Joseph. They thought he was in the group of travelers from their village, and went a whole day's journey before they realized he was missing.

Parenting any child, we realize, is not for the faint of heart. Ramona certainly caused her parents bewilderment and consternation by behaving in ways that made perfect sense to her.

In the Luke passage, we see that even the Son of God caused his earthly parents "great anxiety." Was he a perfect child? No doubt. And perfectly exasperating at the same time! "They did not understand what he said to them." But it seems that Jesus also did not understand why his parents were concerned. He didn't comprehend their perspective.

On the one hand, this is the story of one nuclear family. But it is also the story of the relationship between God and human beings. So often, we don't understand God's perspective. And from God's point of view, human behavior is often illogical.

After this exchange between Jesus and his parents, it's notable that Jesus returned home to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, submitted to their authority, and continued to mature until it was time for him to begin his public ministry.

In some ways, he was more than ready, as his interaction with the teachers indicates. But he would spend another 18 years or so with his parents before launching his ministry of teaching, healing and disciple-making.

Questions: What is the most important lesson you learned from your parents? If you are a parent, what is the most important lesson you learned from your children?

Zechariah 8:4-6

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to

the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? (For context, read 8:3-8.)

One of the defining features of God's presence among his people when he comes to establish his eternal kingdom is that the streets of the city will be full of children playing, happy and free from fear. Old men and women will sit in the streets, presumably chatting together, watching their grandchildren at play, kissing their bruised knees when they fall, cheering them on and laughing at their antics.

During the past year, when families have been unable to gather because of the pandemic, it may seem impossible that we can ever enjoy such times together again. But what is impossible for us is possible with God.

Questions: What are you most looking forward to once we get through the pandemic? What does the image of children playing in the streets suggest to you?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "Beverly Cleary wrote about our world. I lived in her books when I was in school, thanks to Scholastic Book Services. When I returned to the books as an adult I was pleased their stories held up so well, and were, if anything, better.

"Ramona was a real person, and worth loving for who she was, not who she refused to be.

"My favorite scene is Ramona's first day of kindergarten. The teacher points to a seat and instructs her to sit there for the present. Ramona refuses to move, even at recess, because she wants that present. This misunderstanding was a good reminder that children have different kinds of intelligence, and that education is not a one-size-fits-all kind of thing.

"There are four gospels, which is good for those of us who think differently. There is poetry, history, theology, and there's the book of Romans for those who like that kind of thing. I get a headache from Paul's letter to the Romans, but I understand there was this Luther guy who was greatly inspired by it. Not me.

"But when I finally got Genesis into my own hands and read chapter 6, about the sons of gods and humanity's daughters, I was hooked by scripture. Stories tell the truth in a way that literalism struggles with, because when the Word is made flesh and dwells among us, there's no controlling what happens."

2. React to this, from TWW contributor, Mary Sells: "Beverly Cleary's themes of loving and believing in your own possibilities despite what others say or do seem very aligned with our faith path, to continually try to see ourselves as God does, with love and encouragement to be our best selves."

3. In her column about Cleary in *The New York Times*, Elisabeth Egan wrote: "Like real people, Cleary's characters make messes, slam doors, leave nasty notes on the kitchen counter and bicker at the dinner table." Compare and contrast Cleary's approach to her characters with the way

biblical figures are portrayed. Would you rather read about perfect people who have their act together, or people "with feet of clay"? Explain why you prefer one over the other.

4. We're not sure who used the phrase "You are enough" first. How does this concept square with your understanding of the gospel? Here are some quotes using the phrase or the basic concept:

- It doesn't matter who you used to be; what matters is who you decide to be today. You are not your mistakes. You are not your mishaps. You are not your past. You are not your wounds. You can decide differently today and at every moment. Remember that. You are offered a new opportunity with each breath to think, decide, choose and act differently -- in a way that supports you in being all that you are capable of being. You are not less than. You are enough. -- Botanical designer Brittany Josephina
- By being yourself, you put something wonderful in the world that was not there before. -- Mathematician Edwin Elliot
- We are all a little broken. But last time I checked, broken crayons still color the same. -- Former NFL player, Trent Shelton
- Realize that everyone that you think is perfect feels like they're not good enough, too. -- Singer-songwriter Alessia Cara
- You are enough, every day, the way you are. You are loved from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. You are an incredible creation, enjoy your own beauty. -- Entrepreneur Molly Mahar
- Lighten up on yourself. No one is perfect. Gently accept your humanness. -- Writer Deborah Day
- But here's the deal, sweet stranger. You deserve to be the protagonist of your own wonderful, bizarre, terrifying little life. If you decide you are enough, you are enough. You don't need to wait for some grand external validation of your worth before you offer your kindest heart to yourself. -- Singer Kathy Brown
- I was told I wasn't good enough, but I just chose not to listen. -- Singer-songwriter Khalid
- Too many people overvalue what they are not and undervalue what they are. -- Publisher Malcolm S. Forbes
- You alone are enough. You have nothing to prove to anybody. -- Poet Maya Angelou

5. What other characters of different races, ethnicities and nationalities are you aware of in children's literature that realistically reflect the experience of children within their particular culture?

6. What difference did it make to you to see figures you could relate to in the stories you heard and read as a child?

Responding to the News

1. Brainstorm ways you can affirm the intrinsic worth of people who may feel unloved, unlovely and unlovable. Start with yourself. If you struggle to believe you are loved, it will be hard to convey love to others. How can you affirm people who need encouragement in your family, your small group, and your church?

2. Take time to thank God for the children in your life and in your church, and to pray for God's blessing over them.

Prayer suggested by 1 John 4:10, 16; Luke 12:6-7; Psalm 36:5, 7-8; Ephesians 4:1-2

O God, thank you that you loved us so much that you sent your son Jesus to atone for our sins, that we might know and believe the love you have for us! You care so much for us that you have even counted every hair on our heads! Your steadfast love extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. How precious is your steadfast love! We thank you that all people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings, feast at your abundant table, and drink from the river of your delights, because of your grace and mercy toward us all! May we learn to bear with one another in love, with all humility, gentleness and patience, just as you lovingly, gently, and patiently bear with us. Amen