

Mr. Popper's Penguins, the Charming Simplicity of a Childhood Favorite

Recently a friend and I were sitting around watching our dogs play and discussing our favorite books. Interestingly even though both of us are in our 30's and readers the books we wound up discussing were children's books. Perhaps the reason for this is that the stories we read as children hold a very special place in our heart because of their simple, charming, enchanting storylines. The one book that brought smiles to our faces as we remembered it was *Mr. Popper's Penguins* by Richard and Florence Atwater. The next day, a lazy Saturday in the park, I decided to re-read the book and see if it still held a special place in my heart, so I downloaded it to my Kindle. I spent the next hour and half with a smile on face as I read the book. Much like when I read the story as a child I was enchanted with the fanciful but plausible plot and the characters. It amazes me how a book that is so short and so simple could continue to make me smile even as an adult.

The plot of the book is very simple. Mr. Popper is a simple house painter in Stillwater, who has a wife and two children Janie and Bill. When Mr. Popper is working he spends his time reading about the North and South Pole, and dreaming of owning a penguin. He even writes a letter Admiral Drake who is on an expedition in Antarctica telling Drake how funny he thinks the penguins are. Admiral Drake is so touched by the letter he sends Mr. Popper a surprise, his very own pet penguin. Mr. Popper names his new pet Captain Cook, and the new pet quickly becomes a fixture in the family. Things go well at first; Capt. Cook lives in the refrigerator, eats canned shrimp, and goes for walks with Mr. Popper on a clothesline leash. However after a while the penguin becomes ill and Mr. Popper in desperation to help his beloved pet writes to the local zoo for advice. It turns out the zoo also has a penguin who is ill and the zoo believes it because the penguin is lonely so they send Mr. Popper their penguin. Mr. Popper names his new pet Greta, and soon Greta and Capt. Cook produce ten little penguins.

Mr. Popper notices his family of penguins, who has now outgrown the refrigerator and lives in the basement with a special cooling unit to keep them from overheating, like to preform together. Strapped for money he suggests to Mrs. Popper that they train the penguins to preform; thus the Vaudeville act of Popper's Preforming Penguins is born. The act is a success and the Popper's travel around the United States preforming. When they reach New York they encounter some problems and wind up in jail. Mr. Popper and his penguins spend a couple nights in jail before they are bailed out by Admiral Drake. Admiral Drake proposes that Mr. Popper allow him to take his penguins to the North Pole, which has no penguins because the polar bears eat them. However Drake believes Mr. Popper's will be able to survive since they are smarter than the average penguin. At the same time Hollywood comes calling and offers Mr. Popper a chance to put his penguins in film. Mr. Popper is forced to choose and allows Admiral Drake to take his beloved pets to the North Pole because he believes it will be better for the birds. Mr. Popper is heartbroken at the prospect of having to part with his pets, but Admiral Drake surprises him by taking Mr. Popper along, allowing Mr. Popper to realize his lifelong dream.

I believe that story is so appealing because it is a simple fantasy, which seems incredibly plausible. It always seemed to me that it was perfectly possible that a family could have penguins as a pet and the community would accept it. Turning a basement into a winter wonderland with kids and penguins tobogganing down the stairs on a daily basis would be a dream comes true. It is wonderful to

think that four people can get on a bus with twelve penguins and everyone accepts it; after all I get plenty of dirty looks when I get on a bus with my little dog. I loved this scenario as a child, even going so far as to ask my mom if we could have a pet penguin, and as an adult I am still amazed at how perfectly plausible the Atwater's made this seem. In re-reading the book I did not find it dated or find myself wondering why I once loved it so much, as I sometimes do with some of the books I read as a child. The Atwater's succeeded in writing a story that was so simple and charming it appeals to people of all ages. I have read plenty of books that I love as an adult that I love, but whenever I want something simple and fun I will return to *Mr. Popper's Penguins*, for a visit with the lighter and charming side of literature.

Today's children's books are filled with monsters, battles, and supernatural forces. Authors probably feel they have to include these elements because they are competing with computers and video games for a child's attention. Would a story with the simplicity of Mr. Poppers Penguin's appeal to today's child? Hopefully I will learn the answer to this in the near future; if I ever have a child I will read her this book and find out. My hope of course is that she will love it as much as I do.