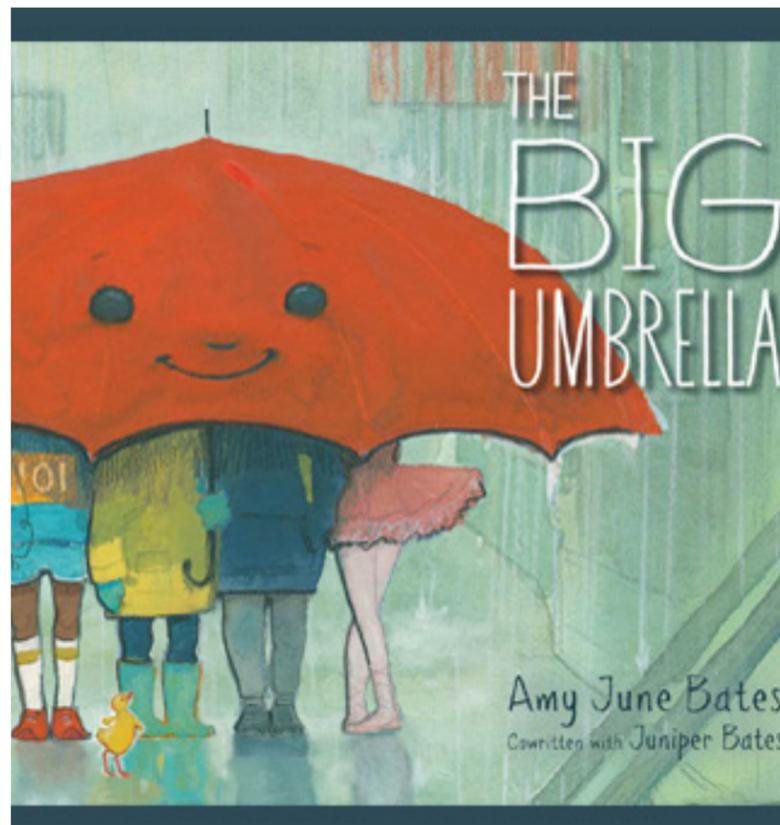


The Big Umbrella Review

By Lynn Mendelsohn

How do we teach children abstract concepts like love, acceptance and inclusion? Most of the time as parents and teachers we try to model the behavior we want our children to learn and exhibit. If we want them to become loving, caring, accepting and inclusive people, we treat them, our other family members, and the members of our classroom families, with love and respect; we demonstrate what is needed to become this person. We try to speak to them nicely, even if we are upset with them; we try to listen to them in a caring way when they want to express their own opinions and we invite them to demonstrate their individuality through dress and other forms of self-expression. We are not perfect role models all the time and it's hard to be upbeat and "on" all the time. As parents and educators, we can sometimes lessen the burden on ourselves by selecting rich literature for our children to read. This doesn't get us off the hook as role models, but if the author's characters are well developed, interesting and relatable, we can help our children reflect on the author's meaning and intent through probing questions. In a quiet moment, before bed, and without the tumult of their classrooms and family rooms, our children can learn to reflect and develop higher order thinking. It's not a bad idea for us to take a refresher course in reflection and mindfulness too. When we shut out the world and read good literature about kindness and inclusion with our young children, we can reconnect with our humanness.



The Big Umbrella, co-written by Amy June Bates, and her daughter, Juniper Bates, is just the right kind of literature to promote reflection and higher thought among all of us. It is an uplifting story—good for the souls of children and their adult caregivers; it encourages children and adults to understand, reflect and act on what is wonderful about being human. Published this year, 2018, *The Big Umbrella* is unique because this is the author's first time as an author-illustrator. On the surface, it appears to be a picture book because of the author's strength as an illustrator but is actually appealing to a broader preschool audience, ranging from older two-years to five. Its simple, straightforward and powerful text very much complements Bates's beautiful illustrations. At the opening of the story, we are introduced to the main character—a big, friendly, red umbrella resting by the front door. It has a deep, peaceful smile on its face. A small child, face obscured and dressed in rain gear, grabs the umbrella and heads out the front door. The child opens the umbrella in the rain and the author shares that this remarkable umbrella likes to help. "It likes to spread its arms wide." In the next couple of pages, we learn that it has the admirable human qualities of desiring to shelter people and gather them in. We are immediately drawn in: who will the umbrella help? What is shelter? Who will be offered shelter? Can an umbrella really do this? As readers, we become anxious to discover the answers to these questions and are pleased and relieved to find out at story's end what we knew all along. This special, seemingly magic, umbrella comes to life, in a particularly human way, through Amy Bates' vibrant, water-color drawings of familiar life situations and through simple, direct text. The Big Umbrella rekindles our own deep, human understanding of and connection to our "best" selves—to everyone and everything on our planet. And we feel happy and hopeful.



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