



Words

Katherine Davis-Gibbon

Anne Berry, Illustrator

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Words is an empathetic picture book that celebrates language's ability to illuminate people's lives.

Beckoning to nascent logophiles with empathy and humor, Katherine Davis-Gibbon's picture book *Words* is about trusting language to be there when one needs it.

Flush with warm park and playground scenes and diverse images of children and their helper adults experiencing a range of emotions, this is a comforting picture book about how the right words illuminate people's inner and outer landscapes. The text discusses the expansive power of language in a general way: The right words for a given feeling or situation are always there, it suggests, even when a person is not ready to work with them yet.

Personified words coexist with human characters across the book to illustrate these ideas. Some, such as the bees shaped like *angry*, *mad*, and *growl* that chase a child across two spreads, enact their action or feeling terms, while others, as with prim *know* and the three-being *new*, are more abstract. Still others are unreadable, like the shy words hiding behind trees and bushes in a page discussing not being ready for the right word just yet.

The book's messaging is poignant and encouraging, as with a warm, poetic spread that meditates

*And isn't it funny ...
How the same word that hurt
Can also heal
And the way to feel better
Is to say its name
To let IT explain
What
And how
And why

And what you're scared happens next.*

However, it's also somewhat conceptual—a starting point for understanding how language serves and sometimes eludes people, empathizing with struggles to articulate particular feelings and challenges without outright solving such issues.

The book's theory-meets-reality approach extends to the cheerful, busy, sometimes rough illustrations, which have the textural appearance of bright watercolors against construction paper backgrounds. While they are colorful and involving throughout, and while their plentiful details engage the eye from edge to edge, their elements are not always clear. This is most true when it comes to the personified words, some of which are easy to read, and others of which require more time to decipher. Still, the pictures of children playing together, receiving comfort and community from

others, running, and hiding are clear and evocative, representing a helpful range of feelings and challenges. Children of various backgrounds are represented: A girl wears a hijab, a child plays with others from a wheelchair, and a child in a sandbox wears headphones that imply sensory overload concerns. All audiences will find a character to identify with here.

Words is a comforting, encouraging picture book in which children engage the words they need when they're ready to do so, and on their own terms.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January 15, 2025)

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