

THE SUITCASE: A STORY ABOUT GIVING

AUTHOR Q & A WITH JANE G. MEYER

In The Suitcase — the protagonist is most likely autistic and several of the typical symptoms of autism are included in the narration about the character. Can you talk about why you developed the character this way?

I can't say that I intentionally made Thomas behave one way or another, it was more about crafting a story around a theme and the characters ended up revealing themselves in a certain way. I know that may sound trite, and I don't always write in that fashion, but I didn't embark on this story wanting to highlight a child who had autism on purpose... I'm sure it arose because of my own experiences in life, because some of these symptoms are so much a part of my everyday life.

Is there a reason that you chose not to stress the possible autism of the main character in a stronger way?

Over the years, I've had the pleasure to hang out with lots of children and adults who have an ASD diagnosis. They are completely unique, individual awesome people, with their own completely unique way of seeing and interacting with the world. Thomas, the main character, is in this story because he heard something that sparked both his mind and his heart and it called him to action. The Suitcase is not a book about autism; it's a book about the wonder of a child and how that wonder and zeal can cause someone to act. It's likely that if this book was about Thomas in a school setting, or being bullied on a playground, that we'd see other parts of his personality and his behavior spring forward. But here we see a little boy absolutely engaged in something he believes in and his confident, straightforward behavior reflects that.

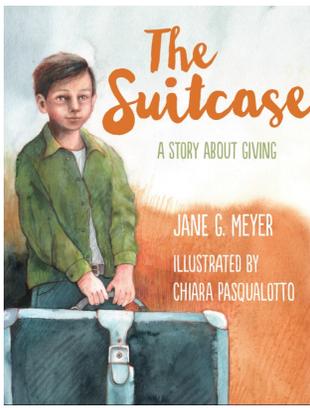
You have a highly-functioning autistic son... Can you share how you hope this book will reach autistic parents or children specifically?

I believe in the power of stories. I know that my son, who is a voracious reader, identifies with many different types of characters, and learns immensely from that magical wonder of good storytelling where empathy for another is created... I assume that every reader, whether they're associated with ASD or not, will take away something different from the story. For any readers who are associated with ASD, I hope they feel affirmed, and not demeaned. My main interest in the story centers around Christ and the life-changing difference He can make in our lives if we let Him.

Did your son pack a suitcase for traveling to the Kingdom of Heaven? Or what was your inspiration for this unique idea?

No, my son didn't pack a suitcase. He might, though, after he reads this story; I wouldn't put it past him!

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The idea for this book came from a homily one of our priests gave at church as we were about to embark on our long, Lenten journey. He encouraged us to pack a suitcase and be prepared for the learning and growth that was to come. Because I'm a catechist at our church (and a storyteller) my mind immediately began to whirl around this metaphor, and so there I was, jotting notes, during church! As a catechist, I've read through many of the Bible's parables together with our kids on Sundays, parables about mustard seeds, and pearls, and found coins, and prodigal sons — and so several of my separate worlds swirled together into this one story...

You talk in the Resource Guide about not squelching a child's enthusiasm — being a 'little person with a big idea.' Can you talk more about that?

I know I've squelched some of the amazing, beautiful ideas that my children have brought to me because I was being an impatient, boring, selfish grown up. Sometimes the better parenting choice comes when we follow the enthusiasm of our children, even if that means putting dinner on hold, or a later bed time, or setting aside some needed errands for another day. It takes a lot of discernment to be a good parent, to decide when to say no and when to say yes, but we should all be on guard, ready to hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit especially when it's coming from the mouth and heart of a little one. Since we have a type of dominion over our children, since they have very little freedom to go on big adventures alone, we should be ready to be a part of those times when they want to jump head first into some spiritual acts of service or learning...

In the accompanying activity guide, you encourage children to write their own parable, and instruct the adults working with the children to not be surprised if Sponge Bob or other characters emerge — and to ask questions about why. Can you say more about that?

Having worked with children for many years, I've learned that we all come to Christ in our own unique ways. Art and other forms of creating, like writing poems or stories, can reveal some very deep longings and hurts, even from very young children. We need to be especially careful not to judge or negatively react to the things that these children create with their own minds and their own hearts and their own hands. A child might find comfort in drawing a dark character, maybe a storm trooper, or Darth Vader, over and over again. Perhaps this allows the child to feel some sort of power over this darkness, a conquering of a fear, perhaps, but of course the child would never be able to speak to you about this in any articulate way... It's our job as parents and as guardians and guides to simply love the child, and commend them for allowing us to be a part of their art, to be a part of their lives. Human beings are such mysteries, but we are only mysteries to each other. God knows us. He works in us. He calls us. If we allow Him, He leads us. So because we are mysteries to each other, the best course of action with a child is to wholeheartedly love them, encourage them, have dialogue with them. Don't criticize. Don't demean. Just love. Love never fails.