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And Say What He Is: The Life of a Special Child

J. B. and Emily Murray

The M.I.T. Press, 28 Carleton St., Cambridge, Mass. 02142. 1975, 232 p., no price given.

And Say What He Is is a tender, moving story of a child "who had no words to say what he was." The authors, his parents, narrate with penetrating sensitivity the life of their son. It is factual, told from diaries, letters, and detailed medical reports, clearly written with love for Little John. Throughout, it is interspersed with poetry John has written for his son.

A valuable contribution, this book should be required reading for all who serve children. Most important is its invaluable use by physicians and other professionals as recommended reading for parents of special children.

The narrative sketches a powerful chronology of the life, spirit, and human needs of a little boy, and of the process of operating within the family. One learns, without having to experience the pain and anguish, the details of raising a special child, becoming intimately involved.

At birth, Little John appears normal. Almost a year later he is found to be retarded in motor development. His abilities gradually deteriorate from the second year on. He "seems to have a defective central nervous system (and has) months, perhaps years" to live.

Not ever is a definitive diagnosis given the parents.

Little John never learns to walk or talk, but he never loses his capacity to evolve and hold on to the world until he "lives long enough to make his point." Those who loved him would "never be unmarked by him." Woven throughout the story is the theme of Little John's self and spirit. One experiences the tenderness and compassion of some physicians and friends as well as the callousness and harshness of others. Having an "abnormal" child often creates feelings of failure in parents. One physician tells the Murrays: "A child like this is a sacrament." They confide that he gave them back their child to love. Special children are part of the family and must learn to live with what they have and are.

This is an extraordinary story. Rich in description of troubled parents, it captures the agony and despair, the love and hope, the sense of this child as a person, vividly demonstrating that the special child, too, shares what all human beings share . . . the right to become what each will be: one's own self.

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