Children's Stories: what are they good for?

Children's stories have been around forever. My grandparents heard them as children. So did their grandparents. I heard them when I was little and thought them fun to read. Even though some children may not be aware of this, these stories also teach lessons about life. I remember one story in particular that I liked. The book is *The Little Train that Could* by P. Watty. It's a great story for children.

The plot of *The Little Train that Could* begins when a train full of toys for children breaks down in the mountains. The toys try to fix the train. But they can't, so they get upset. Soon a big engine comes along. The toys ask it to help them. It says no because it only carries people. It leaves. Then another big engine comes along and it is asked to help. It also says no because it only carries important things. The toys are sad. Then a small engine comes along, a little blue train. Again the toys ask for help. The little engine says it has never pulled anything and it doesn't know if it can. The toys encourage it to try. The engine thinks about it then says it thinks it can over and over and over. It starts to pull the toys over the mountain and it succeeds. Everyone is happy at the end.

The setting takes place in the mountains. There are pictures of hills and mountain tops in the picture and several characters refer to "getting over the mountains." It could be any mountain anywhere and no particular time is mentioned. This kind of "universal" setting is used by writers when they want the conflict and themes to make sense to all children anywhere at any time.

There are three main characters. The toys from the broken train can't get over the mountain and they don't know what to do. They all together represent helplessness or victims. They are meant to epitomize the people who can't fix their problems or improve a bad situation without someone's assistance. They say they don't know what to do and, "please help us..." several times in the story. Any child will relate to feeling powerless so will recognize this quality. The two big engines that came along wouldn't help the toys.
They are used to portray arrogance. One of these trains says, "ME help the likes of YOU? I carry only important people." The conceit clearly shows in these words. The last character is the little blue train. It is probably the character most children will relate to. From the pictures of it's face we see doubt and insecurity. It says that because it has never pulled a train before, it doesn't think it can. It represents feeling “too small,” insecure. All children feel like this sometimes.

The **conflict** this story deals with is what to do when faced with a difficult task. This conflict is seen only in the little blue train after it is asked to help the toys by pulling them over the mountain; it says it’s never done anything like that before. All children get into this situation. They want to do something but feel unsure. So they hesitate. They don't know what to do and they feel afraid. There are three **themes** in this story. Children certainly learn not to expect everyone one to offer assistance. In fact, the story shows that people can be mean for no apparent reason. This lesson is shown by the two big engines, who refuse to help the toys and leave them helpless. This lesson is very important. Children tend to think everyone will like them and that strangers will be nice. Unfortunately today, we know this isn't true. Children could get hurt, even killed, by someone they know or ask for help.

The most recognized theme of *The Little Train* is to try new things- take risks- even if unsure of your ability. All the pictures of and words from the little engine demonstrate this message. When asked to help the toys, it says, "I've never done this before..." and hesitates. What child won't relate to that feeling? My favorite theme, though, is that when faced with a difficult task, be positive. My experiences in such situations are that attitude is almost everything. The most known phrase from this book, spoken by the little train, is "...I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." Children and adults frequently approach a task with negative feelings and these can prevent success.

I think this story is well crafted, and it has colorful, expressive pictures. The **plot** is simple to follow. All children know about trains and can understand the idea of needing help. Children may be surprised that the two big trains won't help. If so, parents can teach this lesson on the spot. The **characters** will be clear to children because the pictures of them show their feelings. The two big trains look mean and the little train looks cute and shy. This particular **conflict** and the **themes** about it are very relevant and
important. All children will relate to feeling unsure and being the "little kid on the block." Telling children to believe in themselves is great for any age. It's good to read a story that talks about this subject. Maybe parents say "You're too big to cry" and things like that too often. Children need to know feeling doubtful about their ability to do things is common.

All in all, The Little Train that Could is a good children's book because of its important themes. And I like the story. I particularly like how simple it is, but it teaches such adult lessons. I like that it uses few words so children will understand. But I think the writer could have spent more time on how the little train felt and what it was thinking. Then children would get a stronger message that other kids feel insecure when faced with new tasks. Maybe one of the toys could have said it would feel unsure, too, about pulling a train if it had never done something like that before. I was always smallest kid for my age. I often felt afraid to do physical things because I couldn't win over the stronger kids. I should have read this story again in grade school. I learned that children's books like this one are relevant to any age. The best children's books should be updated for older kids. Maybe adults should review these books from time to time so they don't forget the lessons but also so they don't forget what it feels like to be a kid!