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I didn’t see the movie *Harriet the Spy* when it came out a couple of years ago. I didn’t want a screen image to replace the Harriet I’ve carried in my mind all these years.

Harriet was a revelation to me, in the way that anyone who is more like ourselves than we are is a revelation. Harriet reminded me of myself, but she also went further than I had ever imaged going. Desperate to understand the world and everyone in it, Harriet creeps into dumbwaiters and peers through skylights to listen in on conversations. The most I could manage was sitting unobtrusively in a corner in a room full of adults. Harriet actually wrote her thoughts and observations right when she had them, no matter who was there or what else she was supposed to be doing. I only took out my notebook later o, after the events had passed. Harriet always insisted that she was *working* when she wrote; I was awed by her assurance because I would seldom have made such a public claim myself. But I understood Harriet’s preference for no-frills notebooks rather than fancy diaries. Today when someone asks me if I keep a journal and I answer, “No, I keep a notebook,” I realize I’m using Harriet’s term.

When Harriet’s friends find and read her notebook, her anguish made complete and immediate sense to me. The book’s illustration of the friends staring meanly at her just after they’ve read her notebook still sends shivers down my spine. It’s so easy to imagine the terror and betrayal Harriet feels at having her private words read aloud. But her friends are likewise shocked and hurt to read Harriet’s astute but unsparing comments about them.

The amazing thing about Harriet is that, as the resulting drama unfolds, she never, ever loses sight of herself. She clings to her sold self-regard even when her world is crumbling around her. When the entire sixth-grade class plots against her and Harriet feels miserable and alone, there’s still a moment in which she writes in her notebook, “I love myself.” This is so terrifically surprising; I’m impressed by it all over again as I reread the book. How many 11-year-old girl protagonists have a moment like this in the midst of such total exclusion from the group?

Not that Harriet is a paragon of self-assurance; she’s by no means immune to the pain of being the class outcast. She cries and tells herself she will have to be very brave to survive this. But she never considers giving up her notebook – for Harriet that would be tantamount to giving up herself. In fact, she copes with the crisis by becoming even more serious and focused about her work. And amidst a classroom where people ignore or make fun of her, Harriet can say, “So what if they didn’t like her? *She* would go on the same. *She* was Harriet M. Welsch, and would continue to be Harriet M. Welsch, and that was the thing to remember.”

This could be the moral of the story, and it would be a strong and powerful one, but author Louise Fitzhugh takes it still further. Harriet is steadfast in remaining true to herself, but not, it turns out, at the expense of her friendships. Instead of having to choose, or having to lose one in order to preserve the other, Harriet finds a way to keep writing and still apologize in a way that her friends accept. In the final scene, when Harriet rejoins her friends, we’re not left with any feeling of compromise or betrayal, either of self or others. Harriet apologizes because she has learned something important about what hurts people and what happens afterwards, and because friends do matter. But – how extraordinary – she has given up nothing: the process does not diminish her. On the contrary, as we close the book, we know that she will remain Harriet M. Welsch, the insatiably curious and dedicated writer. Hooray for Harriet and for all the young readers who, recognizing her strength, keep *Harriet the Spy* alive.

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