

## **WITH THE KIDS; A spoonful of issues**

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With a name like Red Rattle Books, you'd think the new socially progressive kids' imprint from Soft Skull Press would be publishing titles such as "A Is for Activism" or "The Communist Manifesto (for Munchkins)." For 10 years, the Brooklyn-based press has built a solid reputation publishing left-leaning titles for adults -- intelligently written fiction and nonfiction dealing with gun violence, corporate control, pornography and other touchy subjects.

But Soft Skull's entry into the kid-lit world this week arrives with a whisper, not a scream. Simplified and symbolized, it's the metaphorical spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. A universal tale of bucking the system, Red Rattle's debut, "The Saddest Little Robot," is a futuristic anti-corporate fable about fighting The Man, or, rather, The Robot.

"Great children's literature has always been subversive in the sense that it challenges in some way the conventional wisdom about how the world works," says Red Rattle's publisher, Richard Nash. "The idea that we have to do these kind of subversive books is no more than what great children's literature has always been."

With "The Saddest Little Robot," the conventional wisdom is that we are doomed to be cogs in the corporate machine. The story of a misfit "Drudgebot" named Snoot -- who lives and works in a post-apocalyptic Dome City creating "The Life Light" for higher-ups who just take, take, take -- issues a challenge to fight the system, to escape, to be free. Incorporating elements of "Star Wars" and "The Lord of the Rings," "The Saddest Little Robot" is, at its core, a traditional quest story. What makes it unusual for kids is the proletarian twist.

"The one thing that I felt was a little missing is kind of a more subversively playful way of being progressive for kids who are so precocious and almost jaded by information, especially information that is designed to 'make them better,' " Nash said.

To peruse the aisles of children's literature these days is to see shelves crammed with fantasy and magic titles a la Harry Potter, super-sleuthing "Hardy Boys" types, diary-style confessionals and multicultural historical series such as "American Girl." But poke around a little, and you'll find more than a few dealing with progressive social issues -- even controversial ones such as racism, sexuality or the media.

In the '60s and '70s, writers such as Walter Dean Myers, Virginia Hamilton and Mildred Taylor tackled racism, while John Donovan took on homosexuality. Recent years have seen titles addressing AIDS and civil liberties. Red Rattle isn't the first publisher to introduce kids to issues, just the first to deal with such topics exclusively.

"It isn't to say no books exist on social issues, because existing publishers do publish books like that on their list," said Diane Roback, children's book editor at Publishers Weekly, "but this is the first imprint I've seen devoted specifically to this niche."

In April, Red Rattle will release "Bend Don't Shatter," an anthology of poetry by writers "who are gay now and knew they were gay as teens, who are gay now and weren't sure they were gay then, or are straight now but had a crush on their best friend as a teen," Nash said. "It's sort of challenging the fixed idea that there is one thing you can have a crush on when you're 13."

In July, the publisher will release "Hey Kidz! Buy This Book: A Radical Primer on Corporate and Governmental Propaganda and Artistic Activism for Short People." In other words, culture jamming for tweens and teens.

Given Soft Skull's history, "Hey Kidz!" almost seems more appropriate for Red Rattle's kickoff than "The Saddest Little Robot," but, says Nash, "it was fun to make booksellers and librarians think that we're not just Soft Skull Press preaching to the choir again, but that we've got a way of singing to the choir that could get more people into the choir."

Targeting kids was a natural extension of the publisher's audience, most of whom, according to Nash, are in their 20s and 30s and some of whom are having kids of their own.

"We wanted to be able to kind of extend to other areas of their lives," Nash said, "not just what you read before going to bed at night or in the subway, but something you can also read to your child."

Already, Soft Skull had published a couple of titles that weren't necessarily targeted at teens but developed a teen following -- "The Haiku Year," a collection of poems written by and distributed daily among seven friends, and "No More Prisons," essays penned by a self-proclaimed cool rich kid.

Gearing down to the fiction audience of 8- to 12-year-olds was relatively simple. Gearing down even further to beginning readers is also on the docket.

Said Nash: "As we kind of find our feet in it and figure out exactly what a subversive picture book for 4-year-olds looks like, we'll start publishing those too."