



Iris Grace

Arabella Carter-Johnson

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Ever since we came home with Thula, this precious magical kitten has cast a spell over Iris. They sit beside each other as Iris paints, and new doorways to communication have been opened, doors we had previously feared might be locked forever.

Iris Grace is six years old and severely autistic. For the first few years of her life, she barely communicated at all - she hardly ever looked up when her parents walked into a room, she rarely smiled or spoke. Her mother Arabella despaired - Iris seemed to be trapped in her own world, unreachable.

Then one day the family decided to get a cat, Thula, with whom Iris had an immediate affinity. She appeared to open up and communicate with Thula in a way that she hadn't done before. The little girl who seemed to be lost in her own world slowly blossomed. Iris is an extraordinarily gifted artist who sees the world in a profoundly vivid and visceral way, and with Thula by her side, she will sit and paint for hours.

This book isn't the story of a genius or child prodigy (although Iris is almost certainly both of those things), this is the story of how a remarkable bond between a cat and a child saved a family.

Beautifully written, readers will be spellbound by the story of *Iris Grace* and her devoted pet cat Thula.

Iris Grace Details

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From Reader Review Iris Grace for online ebook

Jan Fisher says

I bought this book after following Iris Grace on Facebook and seeing her paintings. Iris is an amazing little girl with a fantastic, loving family. A wonderfully written book that I didn't want to end.

N. says

I've followed *Iris Grace Painting* on Facebook since a friend posted a video of this talented little girl painting. Iris lives in England and is on the severe end of the autism spectrum. During her first years, she had difficulty interacting at all and she was behind her peers in several skills. Frustrated with her inability to function in a preschool environment, her mother decided to work on teaching Iris at home and gradually exposing her to social activities. But, it was painting that offered the first breakthrough. Iris had a natural talent and painting made her happy. Gradually, she began to open up.

The second breakthrough came when the family adopted Thula, a Maine Coon kitten. Thula is an adventurous kitty who goes on bike and boat rides, climbs into the tub with Iris, helps Iris sleep by napping with her and curling up with her at night, and even goes swimming with her. Thula has helped calm Iris when she needed to be soothed and provided a friendly presence.

The book **Iris Grace** tells her story, beginning with her parents' first meeting and proceeding to the present. The author, Iris's mother, is a professional photographer and the book is absolutely beautiful, packed with gorgeous photos, paintings by Iris, and pencil illustrations at the opening of each chapter. While I do think the book suffered a bit from at least one first-time author flaw (the overuse of the word "so"), that single flaw and a couple of minor editing errors were the only problems I found. I enjoyed learning a bit about how a child with severe autism reacts physically. I knew some of the behaviors but not all and I found Carter-Johnson's teaching methods fascinating (but expensive -- sounded like she spent an awful lot of money on props for learning experiences).

I hope, more than anything, I've learned enough to know how to react if I'm ever in public when an autistic child has a meltdown and/or to be more understanding in a public venue. I found it particularly interesting learning about how Iris Grace reacts to music. Carter-Johnson has mentioned frustration with people who are not shy about saying their experience has been ruined by young Iris's movement and vocalization during concerts. While I can understand how they might feel and would never criticize parents in public (I had high-energy children and was occasionally criticized, myself; I keep my mouth shut), it's helpful to be educated about that type of behavior and why, when they take her out in public, they're actually being *good* parents, carefully exposing their child to challenging situations. It's far too easy to judge.

Barbara says

Excellent - a beautiful picture of selfless love, amazing achievements and triumph in this family of four.

Lizzie says

Beautiful and so fascinating. From a mothers perspective this book perfectly tells the journey of a little girl, Iris and her struggles and achievements in dealing with autism.

This isn't a genre I would usually read and I expected the story to focus on Thula the cat but the emphasis on autism and the relationship Iris has with her family and Thula is uplifting.

Susannah says

This was an advanced copy that I won from Goodreads. It's a sweet telling of a mother's total dedication to the development and education of her autistic daughter. The subtitle on my copy reads "How Thula the Cat Saved a Little Girl and Her Family," but the cat (a Maine Coon, truly a remarkable breed) does not come into the story until past the halfway point. This is really about the extraordinary commitment and creativity of Iris's mother and dad and their very supportive family in helping their little girl reach her potential. This family invests their energies in the right things, but even reading about the efforts and creative work of Iris's mom exhausted me. I was envious of the mother's ability to bring plans to reality, her forward thinking. God knew Iris needed that kind of mother.

The child's paintings in my copy were all black and white, but I'm guessing they aren't in the published version and probably add much to the book. The photography is something special. Very sweet and I'm sure encouraging to other parents whose children are on the spectrum.

Marija Cindric says

I've never been thinking about children with autism. I have never met anyone with an autistic spectrum disorder. The author describes daily struggles and victories with her autistic daughter, little things that other parents / non parents are taking for granted. Art, music, nature and animals raises Iris to the seventh heaven. Inspiring story, inspiring child and inspiring and dedicated parents! This is definitely a must read!

Francesca Forrest says

There are many ways to enjoy this book, but in my own case, I think I enjoyed it most as an art and photography book, into which I could dip to read the story of Iris's parents' struggle to understand their lovely daughter, who has autism. Art turns out to be a source of great delight for Iris, and the book is full of her paintings, which are gorgeous. They're the sort of paintings you can spend time contemplating and walk away refreshed. And Carter-Johnson's photos of Iris are similarly beautiful. Iris appears as an enchanting child, curious about the world around her, delighting the green-and-gentle English countryside.

The text is fine, too: you definitely get a sense of the two-steps-forward, one-step-back journey that's dealing with a child who's not typical. Carter-Johnson has great instincts, but the best instincts in the world can't be right all the time, and when a child has special needs, it's exhausting. But the text is by no means a downer--on the contrary, it's heartening to read how much Carter-Johnson loves her daughter and how committed she is to finding a way to help Iris deal with an uncompromising world while respecting her daughter's

sensitivities.

It may just be my own flaws, but I can't help feeling just a touch vicariously resentful on behalf of all the parents of kids with autism who don't have quite the resources that Iris's parents do. The parents of autistic children whom I know have all the exhaustion that Carter-Johnson describes, but also desperate fears about losing their jobs, paying bills, and obtaining even hints of the sorts of services that Iris's parents appear to obtain effortlessly. That said, a lot of the breakthroughs and good developments that Iris's family experience come about because Carter-Johnson pays close attention to her daughter, and that's something that's open to anybody. And, even if not everyone can afford special music lessons and multiple attempts at pets and a remodeled play area, probably anyone can take inspiration from these ideas and scale them to their own budgets.

All in all, an enjoyable, beautiful book that I'm very grateful to have received through the Goodreads giveaway program. I hope Iris continues to flourish as she grows.

Joyce says

The heartfelt story of how a family learns to live with autism--young Iris--and how a Maine Coon kitten became her service animal. It's a fascinating tale of how the mother especially explored options for her child, creating opportunities on her own when schools were inadequate to their needs. The conversational style makes for easy reading (or listening), with details of autism shared painlessly, and her herculean efforts to create a program that allowed her daughter to explore and then interact with her world are simply amazing. Engrossing, candid, emotionally-charged, moving, and ultimately upbeat. Nothing like a cat that saves the day.

Laurie says

Despite the title, the book is really not about Thula the cat. She is in the book, of course, and is an incredible companion and support for Iris, but she occupies only a small part of the narrative. The book is about Iris Grace, the author's lovely daughter who is on the autistic spectrum, and all that was done to reach her and bring her into the loud, bright, fast moving world.

The book starts with Arabella and her husband and their life together before having Iris. Arabella at one point worked with training horses using a method that creates deep communication with the animals; they can be told what is wanted of them with small body movements when it's done right. This may seem like an odd inclusion, but it's important; Arabella's ability to read body language turns out to be critical to the success of communicating with Iris.

After Iris is born and they realize she is not neurotypical, their lives are totally centered on her. Fortunately, both parents are able to work mainly from home, so Iris always has a parent with her, watching to find clues to what will allow them to communicate with her, and trying to interact. They spend a lot of time seeking information on Iris's condition and trying various therapies. Their house is rearranged to give Iris maximum opportunities for exploration and expression. They must have spent a truckload of money on art supplies, therapists, and books. And it turned out to be worth it; Iris eventually started talking, and became able to tolerate crowds and go out into the world so she could enjoy music (very important to her) performances.

And she discovered painting; she'd always loved working with art, but painting turned out to be her passion and forte. Her paintings remind me of the work of Impressionists, especially Monet. Many original paintings and prints have been sold.

And Thula? She's proved to be a stabilizing force for Iris. When Iris is upset, she goes to her and maintains body contact, a firm reassurance. Before Thula arrived, Iris was terrified of taking a bath. Thula climbed right into the tub with Iris, and suddenly being immersed in water was acceptable, even enjoyable. Iris is her person, and she stays with her almost constantly, even at night- going to bed and to sleep is no longer a problem now that Thula is there to share her bed. She's a natural service animal; no training was done and she was adopted as a young kitten.

It's an amazing story, illustrated with line drawings, photographs (Arabella is a professional photographer), and Iris's paintings.

Kathleen says

Not a quick-read or a page-turner but an important read for parents and others who love someone on the autism spectrum. Arabella Carter-Johnson describes, in detail, what life is like parenting a child when you can't break into their world. Each child on the spectrum is different so I do not have all of the same experiences as the Johnson family, but I could definitely relate to several of them!

Arabella's drive and determination to do whatever necessary to help her daughter, Iris, reminded me of so many parents of children with special needs I know. Easy to relate to her joys & triumphs, as well as her frustrations. Gave the book three-stars instead of four because I felt it was quite a bit longer than necessary.

Kathleen Dixon says

This is a fascinating account of how, with an awful lot of hard work and determination, and with the assistance of an incredible cat, the author has brought learning and communication to her autistic daughter's life. The book is beautifully illustrated with photos of Iris and also her paintings (which are lovely). I did find it too wordy though, which was a shame.

Hélène Louise says

(chronique en français ci-dessous)

Once upon a time there was an unusual little girl, born with a very special gift. The gift to see the wonders of the world, to find beauty in the most insignificant little things, the gift to relish in colors, music, nature. But the little girl wasn't quite made for this world, which could hurt her with its noises, its smells, its changes, its insistence to treat her like an usual little girl - whom she was not.

She wanted so much to prove her love for the world, but it was very hard, very painful, and could have been hopeless.

But fortunately the little girl, this very special little girl, wasn't alone in this beautiful and terrible world. She

had a father, and a mother. There weren't unusual as the little girl was, but they were kind, courageous, and clever. And if they didn't understand their little girl, they understood that she was unusual and saw that she suffered, and that even if the world often hurt her she still loved it and wanted to be part of it.

It took time, and patience, and love, and help, and benevolence, and peace, and beauty, and a lot of efforts from all parts, but day by day, the little girl learned to handle the beautiful and terrible world, and her parents learned, just a little bit (but a very important little bit) to see the world as she saw it.

It was very hard for all of them. Sometimes the little girl would cry, kick, hide away to be alone, away from people and their so very strange demands. But some days, beauty was there, everywhere: in the garden, in the sky, in the changing waters, in the colors that the little girl loved to make alive on a large piece of paper. And one day, when life was still so difficult for the little girl and her family, somebody else arrived at home. A new member of the family, a small someone, who had a tiny body with huge paws, splendid whiskers, soft fur, and no human language but all the understanding who lacked the usual persons around the unusual little girl.

Very soon this new person, who was a cat, and who was named Thula, became a part of the family and the very special friend of the little girl. She wasn't either quite of this world, and knew how not to speak to the little girl. Thula thought that the little girl's interests, in small things, in nature, books, colors and music, were quite interesting too. She showed the little girl that having baths were nice, that visiting the countryside on a bike was fun, and that to wake up in the night wasn't so dreadful.

Sometimes, Thula the cat and Iris the little girl (because the little girl was called Iris, like some other little girl I know very well, but this is another story, for another day) couldn't keep together. But then it didn't matter much, as the two knew that they could spend a little time apart, loving the world, and be reunited, for a new day in the wonderful beautiful world...

I love this book, beautifully written and illustrated, so touching and true.

(The natural sense of beauty and wonder of the author frequently reminded me of a favorite English writer, Victoria Clayton, whose clever and witty novels I love).

I've learned to understand more what autism was and, for importantly, what it wasn't.

A wonderful read and, we can hope, a resounding testimony about how to raise and love a child born with autism, and how to nurture their special gifts, so unusual but also so wonderful - and even useful for the rest of us.

J'ai lu ce livre magnifique il y a quelques mois, dans sa version originale anglaise. Je suivais depuis quelques temps la page facebook d'Iris Grace, une incroyable enfant artiste et ai été ravie de pouvoir acheter et lire ce témoignage, celui de sa mère, Arabelle Carter-Johnson.

Je suivais de près la parution de la traduction française, qui n'a pas été très précoce, ce livre étant déjà traduit dans un grand nombre de langues ! Mais qu'importe, il est là !

Je possède une version rigide grand format, mais je pense que ce livre broché reprend l'intégralité des superbes illustrations couleurs de mon exemplaire - un petit bijou (photos ci-jointes). Celles-ci sont de trois types : les photographies de l'auteur, photographe professionnelle, des photos pleines de poésie, d'harmonie et de vie. Des adorables dessins représentant des scènes de la vie quotidienne de la petite Iris et de son amie chat, Thula et enfin des photos des peintures d'Iris Grace.

Iris est un artiste d'un talent qui dépasse son âge, un peintre hors du commun qui exprime, par le biais de la peinture et de techniques variées, son éblouissante vision du monde. Une vision qui nous échappe, une vision merveilleuse mais aussi terrible : Iris est autiste.

L'auteur raconte sa vie, commençant par les prémisses, sa rencontre avec le père d'Iris, leurs voyages à travers le monde, son amour des chevaux, leur projet de rester vivre en France où ils pensaient être installés, puis son retour en Angleterre après une grave chute de cheval qui la pousse à revoir ses projets.

Dès sa naissance Iris est différente, ses parents le sentent bien. Mais il faudra des années d'insistance, de recherches acharnées, pour que le diagnostic soit posé. Dans ce livre nous sommes conviés au quotidien d'Arabella et de son enfant (le père, quoique attentif, patient, compréhensif et aimant, travaille beaucoup), un quotidien épuisé et épuisant. Iris souffre dans ce monde qui l'agresse sans cesse mais qu'elle adore pourtant, pour la beauté de sa nature, les livres, la musique. Mais elle dort mal et son équilibre est instable, renforcé par des rituels incessants et compliqués, et sa mère souffre d'épuisement chronique.

Arabella ne lâche pourtant pas prise, désolée de voir son enfant souffrir tant parfois, de ne pas comprendre le monde vu par Iris, rassemblant son énergie en miette pour chercher, tâtonner, trouver ce qui peut aider sa petite fille.

Le parcours des parents d'enfants autistes est bien dur et solitaire !

Mais Iris a de la chance dans son malheur. Si une mauvaise fée s'est penchée sur son berceau en la condamnant à souffrir de si nombreux stimuli sensoriels, du poids des regards sur elle, des demandes de contact physique, si pénibles pour elle, une bonne fée est venue ensuite, avec sa baguette magique. Iris a des parents extraordinaires, prêts à tout pour elle, d'une patience, d'un amour et d'une compréhension sans limites et surtout, ont les capacités nécessaires à trouver comment aider leur enfant.

Arabella cherche, cherche, se creuse la tête, essaie, essaie encore. Elle tombe de fatigue en permanence (Iris ne veut qu'elle et le travail d'Arabella exige qu'elle passe ses week-ends à photographier des mariages) mais ne lâche pas prise. Elle tente par tous les moyens de trouver ce qui apaise et épanouit la petite Iris et tente de l'habituer progressivement (avec tant d'échecs !) à la vie telle que nous la concevons comme normale.

C'est ainsi qu'elle propose de quoi peindre à sa petite fille de 4 ans et découvre avec stupeur son talent. Peindre apaise et épanouit Iris et sa mère lui installe un petit atelier à demeure dans la cuisine et un autre à l'extérieur, dès que le temps le permet. Ses toiles commencent à se vendre, et Iris se déclare heureuse de voir ses oeuvres partir habiter dans d'autres maisons.

Iris est une enfant passionnée. Elle adore la nature ! Elle l'aime passionnément, comme une petite dryade, de tous ses sens. A travers son regard on redécouvre la texture du bois, la caresse de la brise, les jeux de l'onde... La vision de la campagne anglaise, à travers la plume de l'auteur, ses photographies et les peintures d'Iris Grace, est magnifique de quiétude et de beauté.

Tout n'est pas facile pour autant. Alors qu'Iris progresse dans certains domaines, elle régresse dans d'autres. En particulier, au moment de l'histoire où arrive l'extraordinaire petite personne féline qu'est Thula, Iris ne supporte plus les bains, ni les douches. La toilette quotidienne est devenue un cauchemar, elle qui aimait tant l'eau ! Sa mère se désespère, les journées sont si compliquées, et les nuits agitées et écourtées.

Iris fait deux pas en avant, un pas en arrière, parfois trois.

Pourtant elle fait des efforts terribles, elle souffre de pas pouvoir communiquer avec ses proches et de se sentir si souvent agressée par un monde dont elle aime tant de choses !

Ses parents ont ainsi l'idée de prendre un animal. Les enfants autistes lient en effet parfois des relations intenses et privilégiées avec des animaux de toutes espèces et Arabelle pense d'abord à prendre un chien, un labrador. Hélas le chiot, trop agité, apeure la personne paisible et contemplative qu'est Iris et le projet est repoussé. Jusqu'au jour où Thula, chaton Main Coon, arrive à la maison...

Les chats de cette race sont réputés pour certaines caractéristiques, que l'on retrouve de manière exceptionnellement marquées chez Thula, mais qui ne sont pas systématiques. Je connais de nombreux chats de cette race qui sont aussi craintifs ou méfiants que certains chats européens. Ne pensez donc pas retrouver la personnalité unique de Thula chez tous les Main Coon, pour commencer certains détestent l'eau !

Oui, parce que Thula aime les bains. Elle plonge toute de fourrure vêtue dans la baignoire, chaque soir, et c'est ainsi qu'Iris retrouve le bonheur des bains ! Leur complicité ne s'arrête pas là. Thula trouve la compagnie d'Iris parfaite : calme, douce, passionnée des choses importantes, comme le jardin, les couleurs des peintures, les petits jouets. Thula aime l'accompagner partout, s'installer sur le bord du trampoline, inspecter la peinture en cours, se blottir contre elle pour regarder des livres tranquillement. Elle aime même le vélo ! Équipée d'un petit harnais elle accompagne son amie partout, paisible et enthousiaste. Et grâce à elle, Iris dort enfin. Quand elle se réveille la nuit, au lieu d'exiger que sa mère vienne la chercher et l'emmène en bas jouer, elle caresse son petit chat, joue avec le jouet que Thula vient de lui apporter et se rendort.

Cette relation est terriblement émouvante, magique presque. Arrabella parle de Thula comme d'une amie, une amie très chère qui est venue sauver leur famille ! Cette fascinante relation n'est pourtant pas si étonnante quand on connaît les capacités de communication non verbales des animaux et leur acceptation totale, sans jugement ni attentes, de ce que nous sommes !

Le parcours d'Iris continue, toujours difficile (comment scolariser une enfant si différente, si douée, si sensible ?) mais dans la bonne voie. Peu à peu elle s'ouvre au monde, accepte et initie les contacts avec ses proches (père, grands-parents), apprend à lire, commence à parler. Elle peint toujours, des peintures gaies et colorées, des oeuvres impressionnistes pleines de vie et de lumière. Sa passion pour la musique ne faiblit pas, ses goûts sont sûrs et atypiques, le violon la transporte.

Le livre se finit sur une note optimiste : le couple souhaite se rendre à un mariage de la famille proche en Suède et Arabella prépare le terrain de ce premier voyage d'Iris des mois à l'avance, multipliant les expériences ciblées. Le voyage est un succès, malgré quelques petits hics.

Iris ne sera jamais comme tout le monde, mais elle est sortie de cette prison que peut être l'autisme, réussissant par son talent à créer une alliance avec le monde. Grâce aux efforts incessants de ses proches et la présence unique de Thula à ses côtés elle peut s'épanouir et exprimer son intelligence, d'une vivacité et d'une créativité incroyables.

Ce type de témoignages, de parents d'enfants différents, sont des cadeaux du ciel : ils nous montrent combien nos attentes de la normalité sont vaines et injustes, et comment la beauté et la grandeur s'expriment n'importe où, et que la diversité des humains est leur principale richesse.

Le lecteur apprend beaucoup de ce livre. Comme les parents d'Iris, il apprend à comprendre, au moins un peu, la façon dont les autistes ressentent notre monde, avec des sens exacerbés qui peuvent les faire souffrir. Le lecteur apprend aussi à réviser son jugement, à ne pas affubler d'étiquettes incohérentes une personne si différente, à ne pas interpréter trop vite des comportements.

Un livre aussi magnifique par son fond que par sa forme, que je vous recommande chaudement !

Janet says

The narrative of working with Iris and her progress as well as her setbacks is moving and thought-provoking. I marvel at all Iris' family worked at to encourage and accept the view of the world as Iris sees it. Autism is not easy to understand, yet Iris' family has arrived at a variety of ways to give Iris the rich experiences she needs. We are given insight into not only the successes as they are experienced but also to the frustrations involved.

Isabel says

Um relato muito tocante sobre o autismo.

O entendimento, a adaptação, por parte dos pais e da família de Iris quando lhe é diagnosticado autismo.

A descoberta de um talento peculiar (a pintura) por parte desta menina. E a amizade extraordinária entre Iris e Thula, uma gatinha muito especial!

Sharon says

"Iris Grace" is a completely charming memoir. The titular child lives with autism, and her parents are determined to help her out of her silent world. They try various recommended methods to no avail, and then author Arabella Carter-Johnson gets the idea to acquire a cat. Thula is a Maine Coon, and she somehow manages to get through to Iris immediately. From the day Thula comes home, Iris makes decided, if slow, improvements in her communication. Soon, she is interested in music, all sorts of animals, bicycling, and more. Her favorite thing is painting, and her Impressionistic works find their home on an internet gallery that results in a great many people knowing Iris' story.

The author is frank about the challenges she and her family faced as they dealt with autism. Many an outing had to be cut short because Iris would become overstimulated ... but if they could take Thula, things generally went more smoothly. The young parents' marriage sometimes felt the strain as well, since Iris sometimes seemed unable to deal with her father's presence. Still, everyone around the Carter-Johnsons was determined to help them work through it all.

I enjoyed the author's narrative voice, as well as several of her anecdotes unrelated to Iris. She had been a horse trainer at one point, and it turns out that she and I had both taken Monty Roberts' Join-Up course. She also shared stories of the family's outings to sites I have enjoyed, such as Warwick Castle, which made the text come alive for me.

I also developed a much greater understanding of autism as a result of this book. I would highly recommend it to anyone who wishes to know more.
