



# Philosopher Kids

Tiffany Poirier appeals to the philosophical instincts of kids — in her classroom and in a new children's book about the ABCs of rational thought. It's rooted in a quest she's been on since an early childhood tragedy.

BY TOM HAWTHORN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CANDICE ALBACH

**AS A LITTLE GIRL, TIFFANY POIRIER LAY AWAKE AT NIGHT PONDERING** the big questions. What is happiness? How did I get here? What happens when we die?

She sought answers from the grown-ups in her life, a fruitless exercise. Then, as now, children were not considered capable of handling profound truths. Instead, she heard fairy tales and folk wisdom. She was told to not bother her pretty head with such thoughts.

Today, at age 29, she still seeks answers to her early questions, having embarked on a lifelong quest that has taken her from Uni-

versity of Victoria philosophy studies back to elementary school classrooms. She is a teacher who encourages her precocious charges to be as inquisitive as she had been at their age.

She may have more understanding today than she did as a child, but the supply of unanswered — and, sometimes, unanswerable — questions is never exhausted.

It is her belief, which she puts into practice every working day, that children are natural philosophers.

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"Some people think philosophy is the domain of university professors in tweed blazers with long white beards in some book-bound library covered in cobwebs," she says.

She prefers to introduce philosophy to adolescents with scuffed knees and a natural curiosity. Often, it is the teacher who gets schooled.

"Kids have so much wisdom," she says.

**POIRIER, BA '04, WAS FORCED TO CONFRONT THE BIG QUESTIONS AT** an innocent age because of a shocking tragedy that befell her family. Even today, a quarter-century later, the memory of what happened quickly reduces her to tears, an understandable reaction to so deep a loss.

Poirier brings passion to any conversation, especially one touching on teaching. On a recent visit to Victoria from her home in Surrey, she brought with her to a downtown coffee shop a thick binder of teaching notes, through which she eagerly searched for examples of the lessons she uses in class.

She has flashing eyes, a clever sense of humour, and a rapid-fire patter that no doubt enraptures even unruly classrooms. She would

Children should be introduced to philosophy at their level, she argues, not through instruction from old textbooks.

Even simple misbehaviour in the classroom raises philosophical questions. Take a pupil tapping a pencil. The irksome noise is disruptive, but Poirier is not distracted by the tap tap tap. She hears the student asking, "Do I matter? Do you hear me? Am I alone?" A push in the schoolyard, while obviously transgressive, also poses questions: What are society's rules? What can I get away with?

A lot of philosophical lessons come from child's play. While she was a teacher at General Brock Elementary on Main Street in Vancouver's gritty Riley Park neighbourhood, some students complained about the condition of the playground, which they regarded as ugly and dirty.

She told them a former pupil, the entrepreneur Jimmy Pattison, was donating \$50,000 to improve the facility. She asked the students to consider what would make an ideal playground.

Giant slides, someone offered. Bumper cars, another suggested.

Some children had objections based on their own experiences. What about kids in wheelchairs? How about a bus service to the new playground for poor children?



Some giggling required: Poirier with miniature Plato and Hegel.

**"Philosophy classes should be more like playgrounds of the mind. I think we'd get more done."**

be played in the movies by Reese Witherspoon as Tracy Flick in *Election*, all the achievement without the Machiavellian plotting. Poirier has accomplished much since graduating from UVic, gaining an education degree and becoming an accomplished public speaker and conductor of teacher workshops.

She has contributed to "The Teacher Diaries," a series published by the online magazine *The Tyee*.

Did we mention she has won awards as a teacher? As a vocalist? A songwriter? As an actor?

Earlier this year, O Books published her children's primer, *Q is For Question: An ABC of Philosophy*, which she both wrote and illustrated.

"This is a book of questions," she tells children. "There are no answers. You have the answers."

"Young people, their hearts are open," she says. "They're open to these truths."

The children slipped easily from describing a dream list of features to negotiating which playthings should be included, and why they should be. Next, she had them construct an architect's model in cardboard of their perfect playground.

Sometimes, the lessons are delivered in response to trauma. One of her nine-year-old students came to class one morning eager to talk about the aftermath of a gang shooting and fatal home invasion in his neighbourhood. The boy had no end of questions. Why did that happen? Will that happen to my brother? Will it happen to me?

"Forget the curriculum," Poirier recalls thinking that morning. She also knew she had to address the incident. "You can't protect kids from the world completely."

So, she altered the day's lesson by having the class talk about the event their classmate had witnessed. She asked, Why do you think someone would shoot another person? "He's sad," one child answered. "Nobody loves him." The discussion went from there.

"They're so fresh and honest. They didn't go home and practice their didactic speech. It's happening in the moment."

Another time, she had a dialogue with the class in which they wrestled with the question, Where is your mind?

Some had a knee-jerk response: "It's your brain and it's in your head."

One boy got frustrated because the other students said what he was thinking before he got a chance to speak. When it was at last his turn, his anguished response caught the teacher's attention. "I think my mind is all around me," he said. "Every time I'm about to say something, somebody takes my idea."

Whoa. Now, that's a statement worthy of philosophical contemplation.

**IF POIRIER HAS A KEEN UNDERSTANDING** of the thinking of children, perhaps it owes to the trauma she faced at age five. Her father, a firefighter, departed the family home to go to work fighting a blaze in a forest in the interior of British Columbia. He gave his daughter a hug and kiss, promising to bring her back a gift on his return.

On June 29, 1985, the Bell 206 Jet Ranger helicopter in which he was a passenger crashed and burned while trying to make an emergency landing on Highway 23, about 50 kilometres south of Revelstoke. Roy Friesen would not be coming home, a fallen firefighter.

"I was mad," she says now, blinking tears, "because I felt he never came through with his promise."

Before long, she began wrestling with such questions as, "Where does that love go?"

She did not get any satisfactory answers.

Later still, she suffered the stigma of not having a father to participate in Career Day at her own school. "I was ashamed," she admits. "It was so shameful I didn't have a nuclear family."

Her own brilliant academic career, which included graduating as top arts student at Abbotsford Senior Secondary, led her to UVic, where she more fully indulged her querying nature. She interrupted her work towards a bachelor's degree with several semesters at the Canadian College of Performing Arts in Victoria.

Her time in this city was also one of newfound freedom and experimentation, an opportunity to push boundaries. Against her own best judgment, she took up skydiving.

Why?

"He never came down from the sky."

For her, jumping from an airplane was "a way to take back that event from nature."

She called it quits after 25 successful jumps.

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These days, her working life is spent encouraging children to indulge such thoughts as, "I exist. I'm thinking about thinking." It's like a play within a play. As soon as someone gives you the language, your thoughts make sense."

Should she ever become a university philosophy professor, Poirier thinks she would use the same lessons of hands-on philosophy. She'd use popsicle sticks and she'd have a discussion group pass around a ball of yarn as they exchanged ideas, building a dialogue web. Just like she does in Grade 5.

"Philosophy classes should be more like playgrounds of the mind. I think we'd get more done."

In the pain of her childhood loss, she wrestled with big questions, launching a lifetime of enquiry for herself and those around her. In a way, you might think of this relentless curiosity, this never ending quest for understanding, as a father's gift to a little girl he never intended to leave. ¶



Excerpts from Tiffany Poirier's ***Q is for Question: An ABC of Philosophy***, published earlier this year by O Books of Britain:

#### ***Existence***

What is existence?

Can you define it?

Is there a boundary?

What is outside it?

At the edge of space,  
if you poked your fist,  
could you scoop in  
your hand  
what doesn't exist?

#### ***Happiness***

What is happiness?

What is worth?

Is pursuing happiness  
our purpose on Earth?

#### ***Justice***

What is wrong? What is right?  
Is justice more than black and white?  
Who decides what justice is —  
Is it those with greatest might?

#### ***Logic***

What makes an argument hard to tear down?  
When is it valid? When is it sound?  
What can we prove with logic alone?  
Can logic reveal the world unknown?  
*And if all A's are B's, and all B's are C's,  
then all A's are C's; don't you agree?*

#### ***Rights***

What are your rights?  
Are rights equal for all?  
Which rights apply  
to an animal?

#### ***Virtue***

What is noble?  
What is good?  
Can you always do  
what you should?