THE PLAIN DEALER
CLEVELAND, OHIO
SUN. 560,871
OH-3800

JUN 23 1991
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Gifted need not be a dreaded six-letter word

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I HATE BEING GIFTED. By Patricia Hermes. Putnam, 122 pp., $14.95. Ages 10 and up.

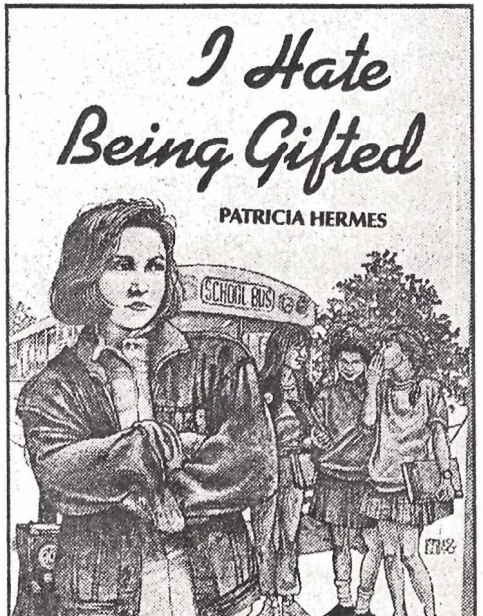
AWAKENING YOUR CHILD'S NATURAL GENIUS: Enhancing Curiosity, Creativity, and Learning Ability. By Thomas Armstrong. Tarcher, 265 pp., $12.95.

By NINA BARRETT

There is only one thing KT, the fifth-grade heroine of Patricia Hermes' young adult novel "I Hate Being Gifted," wants, and that is to be normal. "I'm just so ordinary," she insists early in the first chapter. "The only thing special about me is that I'm double-jointed and can bend my thumbs back against my wrists. And that I'm smart. I mean, I'm not a genius or anything, just regular smart."

But then disaster strikes. KT is tested by the school system, certified as gifted, and assigned to a special class. The kind of class the other kids, the *really* normal kids, make fun of. The kind of class only a computer nerd or a fat know-it-all kid would actually *want* to be in. And, as though that alone weren't some guarantee of social death, the prettiest, most popular girl in her old class is trying to steal her two best friends.

Luckily, KT's parents both happen to be psychiatrists who demonstrate exactly the right combination of gentle pressure and nonjudgmental listening necessary to help KT work through her feelings. So that, by the end of the book, KT learns that other smart kids are just as neat as regular, average ones, and that pretty, popular girls can be very mean because they are secretly jealous that they aren't "gifted," too.



STEPHEN MARCHESI

The cover of "I Hate Being Gifted," a book with a double-edged message for children.

"I Hate Being Gifted," is one of those books very hot in the publishing industry, which is supposed to help the reader cope with a real-life dilemma by showing the problem is normal and valid and, nevertheless, not really a problem at all.

On the other hand, it never occurred to my

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2½-year-old to worry about monsters in the closet till a well-meaning relative read him a coping book about how the monsters that live in closets are actually cute and friendly. Nor did he fear the bathtub until Mr. Rogers had repeatedly "reassured" him that you can never go down the drain.

The message of "I Hate Being Gifted" is similarly double-edged, suggesting potential disaster where it need not necessarily exist. But it also accurately reflects the ambivalence about intelligence that pervades American education today. Parents want to regard their children as extraordinary, but they also want them to fit in. Therefore "giftedness" becomes a kind of handicap, a condition which by definition should set the child apart in a positive sense but which, since it implies a deficiency in other children, can only be acknowledged with dangerous consequences.

Apparently many parents are prepared to shoulder the risk, if the geyser of books about the care and feeding of gifted children is any indication.

These books appear to assume that parents of gifted children are themselves morons. They suggest activities to develop the child's "gifts" (e.g., give your child a set of building blocks, then ask questions such as, "can you find another block just like this one?"). Or they recommend specific toys that would be appropriate for gifted children to play with ("The Gifted & Talented Catalogue," by Susan Amerikaner and Sarina Simon, includes such products as the Little Tykes Cozy Coupe Car — a large orange and yellow plastic item whose claim t intellectual stimulation is said to be "childre can spend hours imagining and creating" wit it).

They also offer guidance and comfort, suc as the observation in Joel Engel's "It's O.K. t Be Gifted or Talented!": "A parent can deriv great pride and satisfaction from helping the children to develop into wondrous human be ings."

But Thomas Armstrong, author of "Awaken ing Your Child's Natural Genius," offers us an other perspective. Armstrong's book is a gentl nudge to parents to recognize and encourag whatever talents and inclinations a child natu rally displays, whether they happen to fa within the narrow definition of giftednes maintained by many schools or no Armstrong's book describes this broader co cept of "natural genius" and also serves as sort of introductory guidebook for parents fa ing educational options that may or may no nurture such genius.

Armstrong's point, in other words, is tha there's something wrong with a system of edu cation that takes kids like KT and makes the feel crippled by the very qualities that shoul be their greatest assets in life. On the contrar we should be working extra hard with the "no mal" children who don't understand what the assets are. We'd be validating the instincts of s many parents that their children are, in fac unique in "wondrous" ways. And if we' lucky, we might put a publishing genre out business.

Barrett is the author of "I Wish Someone Ho Told Me ..." (Fireside), a book about mot erhood.