Gifted need not be a dreaded six-letter word

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


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 book. "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 kid like KT could handle. KT is as neat as regular, average ones, and the prettiest, most popular girls can be very mean. But KT is smart. KT can spend hours imagining and creating with the monsters that live in closets. KT can spend hours imagining and creating with the monsters that live in closets. KT is the author of a book which says that the monsters that live in closets are actually cute and friendly. Nor did she fear the bathtub until Mr. Rogers had repeatedly "reassured" her 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 gefser 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 that intellectual stimulation is said to be "children can spend hours imagining and creating" with it).

They also offer guidance and comfort, such as the observation in Joel Engel's "It's O.K. To Be Gifted or Talented": "A parent can derive great pride and satisfaction from helping their children to develop into wondrous human beings."

But Thomas Armstrong, author of "Awakening Your Child's Natural Genius," offers up another perspective. Armstrong's book is a gentle nudge to parents to recognize and encourage whatever talents and inclinations a child naturally displays, whether they happen to fall within the narrow definition of giftedness, maintained by many schools or not.

Armstrong's book describes this broader concept of "natural genius" and also serves as a sort of introductory guidebook for parents facing educational options that may or may not nurture such genius.

Armstrong's point, in other words, is that there's something wrong with a system of education that takes kids like KT and makes them feel crippled by the very qualities that should be their greatest assets in life. On the contrary, we should be working extra hard with the "normal" children who don't understand what the assets are. We'd be validating the instincts of many parents that their children are, in fact, unique in "wondrous" ways. And if we're lucky, we might put a publishing genre out of business.