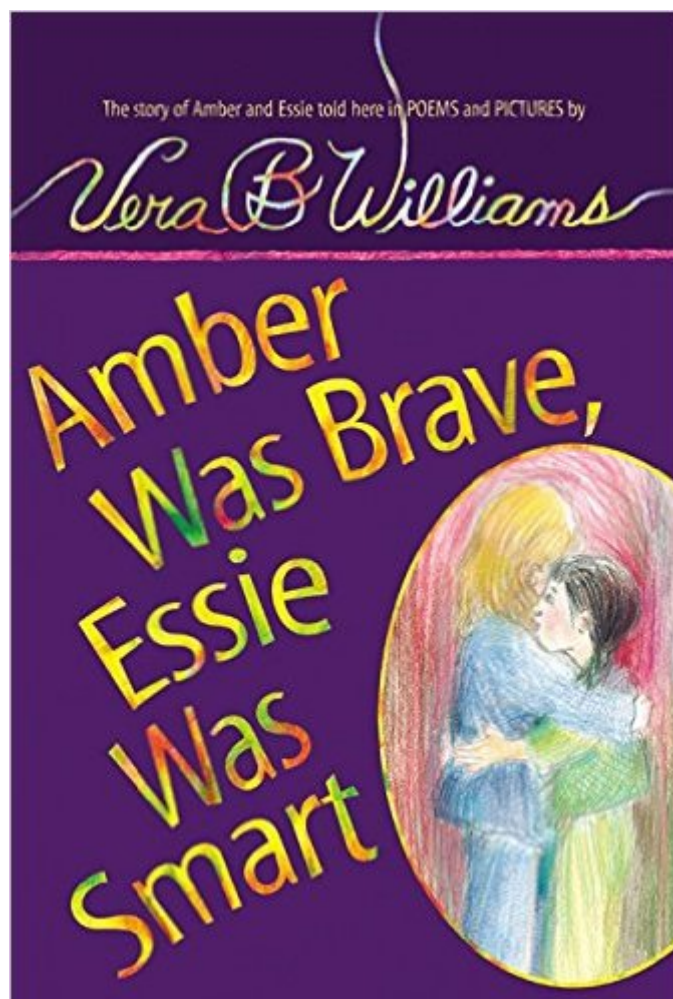


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# Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart



## Synopsis

Essie is smart. She can read hard library books and make cocoa. Amber is brave. She isn't afraid of the rat in the wall or of climbing up in high places. Amber and Essie are sisters and best friends. Together, they can do anything. Ages 7+

## Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 2 - 7

## Customer Reviews

Amber was brave..."She could get the grocery man/to trust them for a container of milk/though their mother/couldn't pay him till payday/Amber wasn't afraid of the rat/in the wall under the sink/or of climbing up in high places" Essie was smart..."Essie could read hard library books/could thread a needle/cook toasted cheese sandwiches/make cocoa/put the lipstick on just right/when they played dress-up" Amber and Essie, two sisters, caught in the day to day struggle of hard times. Their mother is tired and sad, and works long hours for minimum wage. Their daddy is in jail for forging a check when he lost his job and needed money. There is never much to eat, the radiator's always cold, and the phone is turned off until their mother can pay the bill. But there are still the small pleasures of childhood...jumping on the bed together trying to touch the ceiling, playing beauty parlor every Sunday night with Mommy, dipping toast triangles in hot cocoa, making a "best sandwich" together with Wilson the bear. And there is hope.... Vera B Williams has written an unforgettable and poignant portrait of a family clinging to the edge. Her evocative text, told in free

verse, is powerful, yet gentle, sensitive without being maudlin, and really illuminates the joys and sorrows of Amber and Essie's life. Her expressive and understated black and white pencil drawings capture the tough times and happier moments without being distracting. And Ms Williams includes vibrant, colored pencil, self-portraits at the beginning to introduce the girls, and a wonderful family album drawn by Essie and Amber, to complete this remarkable and heartwarming story, after the happy and uplifting ending. Perfect for youngsters 8-12, *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* is an engaging and endearing treasure, told with great insight and wisdom.

WOW! I am not normally a man who reads a lot of poetry and I have occasionally been accused of being cold and unemotional, but this book is one that fulfills all of my requirements of "real" poetry. It is short, direct and highly evocative. When I heard these poems read on the radio, they reduced me to tears. Buy it, buy it, buy it! If even I like it, it's bound to be a sure winner for anyone.

This book contains poetry, and as a general rule I don't like poetry (unless it's funny, and stars that charming man from Nantucket!) However, I made an exception for this book because it's just so GOOD! It's not that rhyming sort of poetry, but a gentle, flowing sort that's even more poetic, which tells a story in separate, glorious little parts. I'm not ashamed to admit, I was so touched by the courage and strength of Amber and Essie in the face of adversity, and their sisterly love for one another, that I cried like a baby when I read this. It's a beautiful story! Yes, sometimes life is hard, and isn't fair. But these kids have a way of coping that's both innocent and wise at the same time. Truly joyous and inspiring!

Adults have strong feelings when it comes to picture books. They sometimes believe that this form of literature serves one single purpose. To help kids learn how to read. While an incredibly worthwhile goal (don't get me wrong), allow me to point out that pictures books are hardly so limited. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Vera B. Williams' picture/poetry book, *"Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart"*. Ms. Williams has tackled serious subjects in her books before (*"A Chair For My Mother"* anyone?) but this is the first time, to my memory, that she has tackled the very serious subject of a father's incarceration. There are probably millions of children in America with mothers or fathers in jail. This book may ease their burden just a bit. Amber and Essie are two sisters that act just the way you'd expect them to. Amber is younger and tends to clutch her purple teddy bear Wilson to her for support. Essie is a little older and is in charge of watching her younger sibling. Their mother is usually away from the girls, earning a living while their father serves his jail term for

check forgery. There isn't a lot to eat at home and the girls are constantly moving between sitters, but they know how to make life bearable. The book is cut into twenty-eight small poems that describe the story of the two girls. Some of these are funny like, "Whoops", where the girls jump up and down on the bed until it (inevitably) collapses. Some of them are sad like, "Conversations Under the Bed". In this poem Amber is crying and asking Wilson to tell her that her Daddy isn't really bad. "Daddy couldn't really be bad because he's my daddy". If that doesn't make you snifle a little then you're made of stronger stuff than I. And some of the poems in the book are both funny AND sad. "There Stood Amber With Her Braids at Her Feet", is your typical humorous girls-trying-to-cut-their-own hair poem. But it ends with the stanzas, "Only I had to cut them off/ Amber said/ to send to Daddy/ so he'll be sure to remember me/ I had to". "Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart" has a happy ending (Daddy comes home after having finished his time and everyone's overjoyed) so don't worry about that. I think Vera B. Williams really should be commended for not only tackling the subject of jailed parents, but also the day to day trials of poverty. You can tell that the girls' mom is making due, but just barely. There are whole stories suggested in these little poems above and beyond what's written here. Now normally, I have to admit, I don't care too much for Vera B. Williams's illustrations. But the pictures in this book are perfect. They're all done in pencil, some colored, some not. Sometimes they're detailed and sometimes they're just the barest of outlines. The book comes with a "photo album" of the characters that kids will enjoy pawing through after reading the story. I think that if you've a child that can handle a little reality, this book is a more than appropriate companion. It tackles difficult grown-up problems in a manner that is not only understandable to children, but meaningful as well. Consider pairing it with the similar, "Visiting Day", if you want another picture book on this topic.

Although the age group listed for this book is 9-12, I first learned of it from a preschooler in my classroom. The girl who shared the book does not have a sister, lives with both parents in an upperclass neighborhood, and would seem to have little in common with Essie or Amber. And yet, this story reached her, she connected immediately with the strengths and longings of both children. She wants to BE these children, for their strength and humanity. What a great way to begin to bridge the socioeconomic gap! Other children from very diverse backgrounds in my class were also immediately drawn to the poetry of warmth, hope, caring, friendship amidst troubling circumstances.

This is a touching story of two sisters who are dealing with a traumatic event that had a significant effect on their lives. The art work enhances the story and is great in it's own right. After I bought

this book, I couldn't wait to share it with my own sister and other close friends who I knew would love it too.

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