

# BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's & Young Adult Books

Minnesota State University, Mankato

December 2006

The last *Book Notes* issue of 2006 contains reviews of books that range from biographies of political and military leaders to young adult novels to picture books about friendship and imagination.

Jane O'Connor offers parallel stories of two Victorian families in her winter tale of *The Snow Globe Family* (Penguin). In a large human-size house, a mama, papa, and three children lead a quiet and refined life. Only Baby notices the snow globe high on the mantel. Inside that globe lives a very tiny family with mama, papa, boy, girl, and baby. They enjoy their perpetual winter by building snowmen "as big as lumps of sugar," making tiny snow angels, and skating on a pond the size of a silver coin. However, the parents reminisce about days long ago when storms shook their house, and the snow heaped into piles perfect for sledding. When a snowfall in the larger world provides Baby with a chance to reach the mantel and pull over the globe, the tiny family gets its wish. Both families, large and small, enjoy the snowy, wintry world. S. D. Schindler's paintings manage to make the snow globe family members look doll-like and human simultaneously. The startling view of Baby's huge eyes peering into the snow globe while the tiny baby waves back draws the two worlds together. –KP

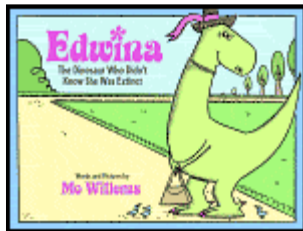


A much darker view of Victorian life forms the backdrop for Justin Richards' *The Death Collector*, in which murder, grave-robbing, and an unlikely monster make for fast-paced action from the first page to the exciting conclusion (Bloomsbury). Set in London, the thriller begins when "four days after his own funeral, Albert Wilkes came home for tea." Because the incident seems so bizarre, Nora Wilkes fears reporting her husband's implausible appearance. She collapses while a clergyman and his daughter pay a routine visit following her husband's abrupt departure to walk the dog. Meanwhile, a fire and death during a robbery attempt in the British Museum, where Albert used to work, compels a teen employee to look up an industrialist he thinks might help him discover what the thieves



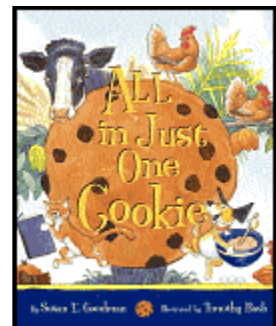
wanted. However, before he can get there, a pickpocket steals a piece of paper he had hoped to show the industrialist. Later that night, a policeman preparing to go off duty discovers that although Alfred Wilkes' grave has been tampered with, the body *is* in the casket. Driven by fear, the museum worker, pickpocket, and clergyman's daughter form an improbable trio to solve the mystery and protect themselves from thugs intent on killing them for something they don't realize they have. —MF

The frightening machine-dinosaur hybrid monster featured on the cover of *The Death Collector* bears almost no resemblance to the gentle title creature of Mo Willems' *Edwina, The Dinosaur Who Didn't Know She was Extinct* (Hyperion). Elegantly accessorized with hat, pearls, and over-the-arm purse, Edwina, a huge green dinosaur, knows everyone in town and resembles Queen Elizabeth more than she does T. Rex. Not only does Edwina help old ladies across the street and serve as a slide for the neighborhood kids,

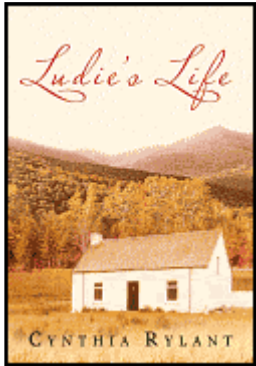


but she also bakes chocolate chip cookies for everyone. Enter the “villain” of the story: Reginald Von Hoobie-Doobie. Reginald takes on the mission of convincing his class that dinosaurs are extinct. While the students agree that **most** dinosaurs might be extinct, Edwina definitely is alive, well, and baking cookies. Reginald employs flyers and protests to disprove Edwina's existence and uses his most persuasive arguments to convince Edwina herself. Undeterred by the knowledge of her extinction, Edwina simply bakes more cookies . . . to share with Reginald. Willems' distinctive cartoon style reinforces a deadpan approach to the absurdity of the situation.—KP

Grandma's cat and dog provide the real low-down on chocolate chip cookie ingredients in Susan E. Goodman's *All in Just One Cookie* (HarperCollins). While Grandma makes the dough, cat and dog undertake research on where the various ingredients originate. Small panels provide facts on how sugar is refined, wheat is harvested, baking soda is mined, and other cookie components are produced. A double-page spread incorporating a world map pinpoints various locations where items such as chocolate and vanilla originate. Timothy Bush's illustrations contain multiple facets per page in order to show Grandma's activity in the kitchen as well as the discoveries of cat and dog. A recipe at the end will allow older children (or adults and children together) to make cookies themselves.—KP



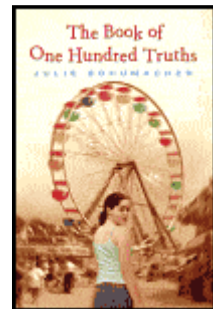
Grandmothers play an important role in two books for older readers. Newbery Medalist



Cynthia Rylant creates a narrative story in her collection of poems, *Ludie's Life* (Harcourt). The main character is Ludie, a woman who grew up in Alabama and moved to West Virginia with her coal miner husband in the early 1900s. The poems follow her experiences from her early life through her death. Young adults could appreciate the content of this book because of their personal experiences with grandparents. The poems are written in free verse and are untitled, a format that makes the poems easily flow from

one to the next. Rylant pays specific attention to line breaks, and the poems serve as excellent examples of free verse poetry for young adults.—NS

Since she was six years old, Thea has spent part of each summer with her grandparents on the Jersey shore. As twelve-year-old Thea prepares to board the plane in Minneapolis this year, her mother gives her a notebook and explains, “You can write anything you want in here, as long as every single thing you write is true.” She challenges Thea to write four or five truths a day so that by the end of the visit, the notebook will contain “a hundred true things.” In *The Book of One Hundred Truths* by Julie Schumacher (Delacorte), Thea learns how difficult that assignment can be and how many secrets everyone hides. When she arrives at her grandparents’ house, the place is so full of aunts and cousins that she knows she won’t get the “lonely time” she expects and enjoys. Instead of staying in her usual room,



she has to share a room with her seven-year-old cousin, Jocelyn, for whom she is supposed to baby-sit. As Thea records her truths, you will wait anxiously to find out what happened at Three Mile Creek because of references to an incident there. When Jocelyn spies on Aunt Celia and Aunt Ellen, you’ll wonder if she’s just a curious child or if the women are really up to something. Schumacher creates an endearing, and at times humorous, family story of two cousins who not only discover difficult truths about themselves and each other but also become friends.—TS

Nothing is what it seems to be at first glance in *Black ? White! Day? Night!*, a lift-the-flap book of opposites for sophisticated viewers by Laura Vaccaro Seeger (Roaring Brook). The intriguing shifts in viewpoint created when the page-size flaps containing a cut-out frame are



raised to reveal a larger picture underneath stimulate creative thinking. For example, the head and torso of a white dog look deceptively “clean” until we see the entire picture of a spilled paint can and pink paw prints all over the decidedly “dirty” floor. Five small windows each show a tiny blue diamond on a white background, leading the viewer to assume they are all “alike.” However, in the picture underneath, each is part of a complex snowflake that is quite “different” from the rest. The book can be used for examples of graphic design as well as lessons in vocabulary building.—KP

Dealing with the unexpected perplexes Farmer McPhee when he discovers *The Red Lemon* while harvesting his crop (Random House). He imagines how wonderful his fruit will be until finds a surprise on one of the branches: a red lemon. “I can’t have red lemons / where yellow fruit grows!” he says. “Who’d buy a *red* lemon / from Farmer McPhee?” He tosses the fruit onto a neighboring island, where it starts a new grove of red lemon trees. Author-illustrator Bob Staake wrote a narrative poem with frequent rhymes for the text. “When people bite into a / fruit that they chew, / they count on it being / the *right*-colored hue!” This attention to rhythm and rhyme creates an upbeat story that young children, ages 5-8, will enjoy hearing read and which will be fun for adults to read aloud. The illustrations are colorful and emphasize geometric shapes. They resemble pop art in the way that they appear simple but upon closer examination are filled with intricacies. –NS



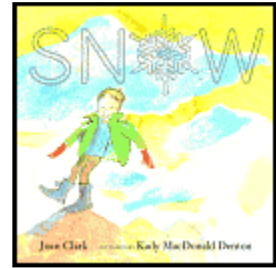
For her first picture book, Minneapolis author Nancy Crocker, also uses a rhymed text and manages to avoid most of the pitfalls that can accompany that choice. *Betty Lou Blue*



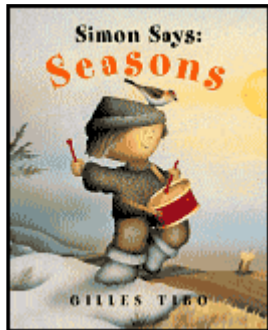
bounces along with few hitches for the adult reading the text aloud (Penguin). *Betty Lou Blue*’s outrageously large feet attract the taunts and jeers of her classmates. Despite her mother’s assurances that everyone is special, Betty Lou has her doubts. However, a school-closing snowstorm and a disastrous snow slide change the kids’ opinion about Betty Lou’s “whackety, thwackety, flappety feet.” Because her oversized shoes help her walk on top of the drifts “without sinking an inch,” Betty Lou can walk the other children out to the plowed street one at a time. Illustrator Boris Kulikov makes Betty Lou’s feet distinctively large but not grotesque. The children’s wide-eyed expressions reveal their emotions, from

delight in building a snowman to shame in recalling how they had treated Betty Lou. Perhaps the plucky heroine will return for further adventures.—KP

Joan Clark explores what might really lurk under banks of *Snow* after a month-long storm (Groundwood). Sammy and his family don't seem unduly concerned as the snow piles up for days and weeks. When the sun finally emerges, Sammy finds that the houses have turned into snowy mountains, and his roof is the highest of them all. From that vantage point, he imagines that beneath the white crust bears hibernate and seals swim in arctic waters. Santa's workshop and dwarves' mines of emeralds and rubies lie concealed by the drifts. Spring's slow return melts these fantasies away, to be replaced by puddles, slush, and dreams of green grass. Kady MacDonald Denton's watercolor and ink illustrations provide striking images of the cold world, including an intriguing and colorful backdrop of Northern lights highlighting igloo builders. The hard-working snowplow and tiny human shovelers reveal ways of coping with winter's onslaught.—KP



Gilles Tibo explores the entire year in *Simon Says: Seasons* (Tundra). This compilation of four books about Simon published 1989-1991 brings together his observations about all the seasons. Told in first person, the whimsical story shares his viewpoints on the natural world. For



example, in spring, he tries to help the flowers grow by attaching balloons to the emerging shoots. In winter he and his companion, Marlene, try to capture the stars in the sky so that they can count them. Outdoor activities such as blowing bubbles, flying kites, and walking on stilts offer a somewhat romanticized view of childhood, which is reinforced by softly textured illustrations. However, for young children, the text provides a

chance to reflect about their own activities during the changing seasons and to participate vicariously in Simon's adventures.—KP

Although it's tempting to feature books with winter settings at this time of year, K. A. Nuzum's first novel, *A Small White Scar*, takes place during the summer of 1940 in the ranching area of Colorado (HarperCollins). Determined to prove himself as a man and escape the caretaking role he has had for his twin brother, 15-year-old Will plans to compete in a rodeo where he can demonstrate the skills he knows will



earn him a place on another ranch. Ever since his mother's death seven years earlier, Will has had to care for Denny, who has physical and mental disabilities but displays an unquenchable admiration for and devotion to Will. When Will leaves home, Denny manages to follow despite the rugged terrain and Will's attempts to elude him. Because Will narrates the novel, we understand his frustration, his guilt, and his desire for a different life. The blend of adventure, action, and reflection will hold the attention of middle grade readers and challenge them to think about how family obligations and individual ambition can co-exist. The idea that in the past families were told to institutionalize some children deemed "un-teachable" may be a revelation to today's students.—KP

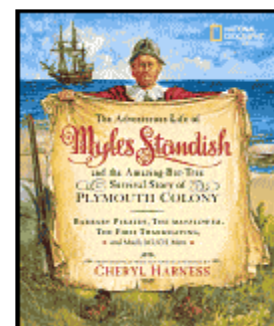
In Helen Frost's third book of poems, *The Braid*, two sisters are separated even though they would have preferred to remain together (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Frost displays the



same attention to poetic form as in her previous two books while creating a narrative. The poems contain three basic elements: "narrative poems, in two alternating voices; praise poems, each of which praises something named in the narrative poems; line lengths based on syllabic counts." For the narrative poems, "the last words of each line in one narrative poem are the first words of each line in the following narrative poem." The praise poems follow a similar structure, except "the last line of one praise poem is

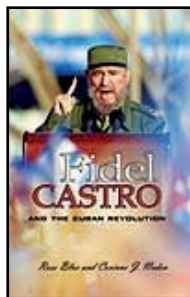
braided into the first line of the next praise poem." The syllabic counts for each line represent the age of the speaker. The "braided" aspect of the poems is complex, yet subtle. Readers can follow the story without conscious recognition of the poetic patterns. The speakers of the poems are Jeannie and Sarah, sisters who are separated in 1850 during the Highland Clearances of Scotland. Each sister keeps a braid made by intertwining her own hair with some of her sister's, helping them remain connected despite their lives on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Young adult readers will appreciate the book, which may have more appeal for a female audience.—NS

Award-winning author and illustrator Cheryl Harness has written a first-rate book about a soldier who made the Atlantic crossing in the 17th century. *The Adventurous Life of Myles Standish and the Amazing-But-True Survival Story of Plymouth Colony* is an example of Harness' thorough coverage of her subjects, complete with yearly timelines covering world history from 1584-1660 (National



Geographic). Standish, an orphan, became a toughened soldier who fought against Spain. Eventually, Standish and his wife joined those sailing for the new world to escape persecution and poverty in Europe. Standish served as military advisor. The voyage's hardships hardly compared with the difficulties the Pilgrims faced after landing at Plymouth Rock. Hunger, fear, bitter cold, and lack of shelter brought sickness and death to many. An Indian named Squanto, despite having been sold into slavery by earlier visitors, saved the Pilgrims from starving by teaching them to live off the land. Settlers and Indians celebrated with a three-day Harvest Home feast. Standish drilled the colonists in methods of self-defense and a year later, following an Indian attack, helped them build a sturdy fort for protection. Red-headed, little Myles Standish—dubbed *Captaine Shrimpe* by English aristocrat Thomas Morton—seemed fearless as he dealt with both peaceful and war-like Indians. He lost his wife, all but one son, and many friends, but Standish stayed in Plymouth Colony until his death in 1656.—MF

Rose Blue and Corinne J. Naden present a biography of a contemporary military and political leader in *Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution* (Morgan Reynolds). For more than half a century, Castro has played a prominent role on the world stage, particularly in Latin



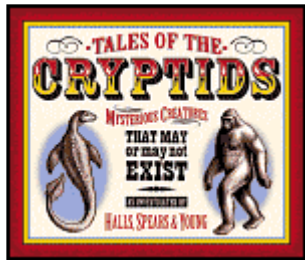
America. Blue and Naden provide a straightforward, succinct summary of Castro's involvement with various political upheavals, not only in Cuba but also in South America and Africa. His success in securing aid from the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China by playing those governments off against one another reveals how his actions often depended on practical rather than ideological concerns. The ongoing antagonism between Cuba and the United States remains a constant theme of his time in power. Noting his declining health, including his surgery in July 2006, the authors discuss his uncertain legacy and possible successors to lead Cuba. The clear overview and summary of complex foreign relations initiatives will help students understand the transition that will undoubtedly occur in the near future.—KP

An uncertain future awaits the entire planet in Susan Beth Pfeffer's contemporary novel, *Life As We Knew It* (Harcourt). A young high-school girl chronicles her life through diary entries, and readers go day-by-day with her documentation of a meteor's collision with the moon and the global after effects that make people wonder if the world is ending. Tsunamis, floods, volcanoes, and earthquakes cause panic and



confusion as the moon, knocked from its orbit, seems to hang perilously close to the earth. Sporadic electricity, food shortages, and expensive and scarce gasoline force school closings as citizens try to cope with the new realities of their lives: no TV, no phones, no air conditioning, and eventually, no heat in the winter. Epidemics soon break out all over the world, as do droughts, ice storms, and famine. Pfeffer hold readers' interest throughout the book, as the page-turner shows different coping methods people use during the events of seemingly impending doom. Tempers flare and hopelessness alters forever the lives of the survivors as they learn to live with the fear and the madness.—MF

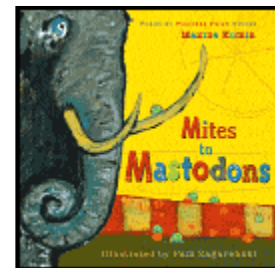
Although it's possible to speculate about future disasters, other authors choose to investigate claims about mysterious creatures that might currently exist. Kelly Milner Halls, Rick Spears,



and Roxyanne Young present *Tales of the Cryptids: Mysterious Creatures That May or May Not Exist* (Darby Creek). The book offers young readers an intriguing look at Bigfoot and similar phenomenon that have been sighted all over the world. From the Loch Ness Monster and sea serpents to Mothman and Pterodactyls, scientists study

evidence relating to each alleged sighting. Fifty-eight cryptids are catalogued in a *Cryptidictionary* that describes the animals which scientists are researching. The authors use a Reality Index from 5-1 to rate each cryptid with five dots designating *real* to one dot denoting *hoax*. Each cryptid's profile includes its name(s), places sighted, length, weight, and physical characteristics. Drawings, photographs, footprints, and fossils that have been collected generously illustrate the book. Because scientists have found that some cryptids do *in fact* exist, the search continues despite the scoffing of much of the scientific community. As Dr. Jane Goodall says, "There is a lot more evidence that they do exist . . .than that they don't" (20).—MF

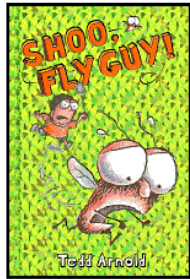
Animals that definitely exist are the subjects of *Mites to Mastodons*, poems by Pulitzer Prize winner Maxine Kumin and illustrations by artist Pamela Zagarenski (Houghton Mifflin). However, the types of animals vary widely. A few subjects are domestic (house cats), wild (kangaroos), small (mites), tall (giraffes), sea-dwellers (manatees), common (polliwogs), and extinct (mastodons). In each of the poems, Kumin



ends lines to emphasize words that rhyme and tends to follow a metrical pattern in the lines, although each poem has differing patterns. The effect of this technique is sophisticated since not

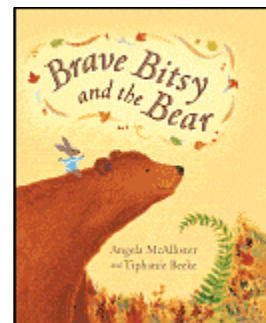
all the rhymes are exact, and not every line has the same number of syllables. Children ages of nine through eleven would enjoy this poetry. Zagarenski created the illustrations from different mixed media including paper, canvas, wood, collage, and computer graphics. The results are colorful and detailed with large areas of visual texture to hold the reader's interest.—NS

A most unusual insect gets top billing from Tedd Arnold. If you are looking for a chapter book for a reluctant reader, look no further! From its sparkly green cover to the last page,



Arnold's *Shoo, Fly Guy!* (Scholastic) will capture the attention of both young and old. This is the story of a boy who had a pet fly, Fly Guy, and "Fly Guy could say the boy's name—Buzz!" In this humorous adventure, Fly Guy goes in search of his favorite food, which is "brown, oozy, lumpy, and smelly." The clever text is simple and spare, which makes for a perfect easy reader. Arnold's comic illustrations combine watercolor and line drawings to bring the story to life, while the background details, such as using the book, *The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*, for the roof of Fly Guy's glass house make the book an entertaining read for everyone. Luckily, this is just one book in a series of Fly Guy adventures.—TS

The final book in this issue is another story of an improbable friendship, this time between a small stuffed rabbit and a real-life bear. Angela McAllister introduces the two in her picture book *Brave Bitsy and the Bear* (Houghton Mifflin). On an autumn afternoon, Bitsy falls out of her owner's pocket while the little girl is on a walk in the woods. Despite Bear's need to find a hibernation spot for his winter sleep, he makes a detour to bring Bitsy home safely. However, that night's snowfall concerns Bitsy. Had Bear gotten to his cave before he fell asleep? Setting off on a daring search, Bitsy unravels a ball of wool behind her to find her way back home then uses a strand from her own sweater to continue the search once she runs out of the other wool. Finding Bear asleep in the forest, Bitsy tries to warm him, but she is too small. Forest creatures come to the rescue, constructing a shelter that allows Bear to have the "best winter sleep" ever, as he announces in spring. Tiphonie Beeke's soft and sunny illustrations make this unlikely friendship plausible in a great story to share with preschoolers.—KP



The above book reviews were written by:

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Books reviewed in this issue:

O’Conner, Jane. *The Snow Globe Family*. Illus. by S. D. Schindler. Penguin, 2006. ISBN 0-399-24242-2. \$16.99.

Richards, Justin. *The Death Collector*. Bloomsbury, 2006. ISBN 1-58234-721-2. \$16.95

Willems, Mo. *Edwina, The Dinosaur Who Didn’t Know She was Extinct*. Hyperion, 2006. ISBN 0786837489. \$16.99.

Goodman, Susan E. *All in Just One Cookie*. Illus. by Timothy Bush. HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-009092-8. \$16.99.

Rylant, Cynthia. *Ludie’s Life*. Harcourt, 2006. ISBN 0-15-205389-1. \$16.00.

Schumacher, Julie. *The Book of One Hundred Truths*. Random House, 2006. ISBN 0-385-73290-2. \$15.95.

Seeger, Laura Vaccaro. *Black? White! Day? Night!*. Roaring Brook, 2006. ISBN 1-59643-185-7. \$16.95.

Staake, Bob. *The Red Lemon*. Golden Book, 2006. ISBN 0-375-83593-8. \$14.95.

Crocker, Nancy. *Betty Lou Blue*. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. Penguin, 2006. ISBN 0-8037-2937-5. \$16.99.

Clark, Joan. *Snow*. Illus. by Kady MacDonald Denton. Greenwood, 2006. ISBN 0-88899-712-4. \$16.95.

Tibo, Gilles. *Simon Says: Seasons*. Tundra, 2006. ISBN 0887767931. \$17.95.

Nuzim, K.A. *A Small White Scar*. HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-075639-X. \$15.99.

Frost, Helen. *The Braid*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. ISBN 0-374-30962-0. \$16.00.

Harness, Cheryl. *The Adventurous Life of Myles Standish and the Amazing-But-True Survival Story of Plymouth County*. National Geographic, 2006. ISBN 0-7922-5918-1. \$16.95.

Blue, Rose and Corinne J. Naden. *Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution*. Morgan Reynolds, 2006. ISBN 1-59935-029-7. \$27.95.

Pfeffer, Susan Beth. *Life As We Knew It*. Harcourt, 2006. ISBN 0-15-205826-5. \$17.00.

Halls, Kelly, Rick Spears and Roxanne Young. *Tales of the Cryptids: Mysterious Creatures That May or May Not Exist*. Illus. by Rick Spears. Darby Creek, 2006. ISBN 1-58196-049-2. \$18.95.

Kumin, Maxine. *Mites to Mastodons*. Illus. by Pamela Zagarenski. Houghton Mifflin, 2006. ISBN 0-618-50753-1. \$16.00.

Arnold, Tedd. *Shoo, Fly Guy*. Scholastic, 2006. ISBN 0-439-63905-0. \$5.99.

McAllister, Angela. *Brave Bitsy and the Bear*. Illus. by Tiphonie Beeke. Clarion Books, 2006. ISBN 0-618-63994-2. \$16.00.