

BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's/Young Adult Books

Minnesota State University, Mankato

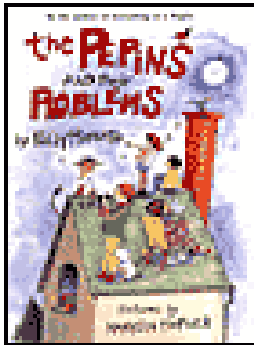
February 2005

Many humorous books for children and young adults relate to home or school, pets or other animals. Quirky families are a staple of such books, including several published recently. Although Simon Mason and his fictional family, the Quigleys, live in England, their lives don't seem so different from our own. In the third book about them, The Quigleys not For Sale, Will and Lucy undertake some unsuccessful fundraising schemes, encounter a bull where they are hiking with friends, regale other diners at a fancy hotel with descriptions of cholera epidemics, and try to discourage potential buyers from purchasing the "too small" house they have decided is just right. Helen Stephen's line drawings extend the merriment in the four interconnected stories for middle-grade readers in this book from Random House.

Owen Skye continues to get into predicaments in Alan Cumyn's second book about him, After Sylvia (Groundwood). Owen secretly maintains a crush on Sylvia, who has moved to another town, but he doesn't know how to contact her or even if she is interested in having him do so. In the meantime, he has to contend with his brothers and cousins, not to mention the practical jokes initiated by his father, Horace. For example, Owen believes Horace's contention that teachers change the multiplication tables yearly, which leads to a bizarre conversation with his first year teacher. The arrival of a slobbery dog who insists on carrying around a special rock adds to the confusion of the Skye household. Owen's bid for class presidency fails, and the attempts he and his brother make to outsmart their girl cousins never quite succeed either. However, in the end, amid a chaotic birthday party, he realizes that only-child Sylvia might be just a bit envious of his unconventional family.



Polly Horvath introduces another unconventional family in her intermediate book, The Pepins and their Problems, illustrated by Marilyn Hafner (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). The Pepins have a slew of extraordinary problems: they wake up with toads in their shoes, their cow randomly produces lemonade instead of milk, and a mysterious dapper gentleman arrives at their house, declares himself home and begins to

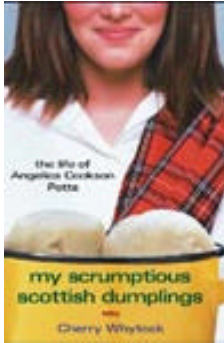


read the evening paper. Fortunately, the Pepins also have a slew of extraordinary solutions to these problems, some of which the author, Polly Horvath, elicits (by antennae) from readers all over the U.S. Yes, Ms. Horvath asks the readers what on earth the Pepins should do and gets responses from places stretching from Normal, Illinois, all the way to Peanut, California. Horvath has created an outlandish cast of characters on a zany and rollicking ride while Hafner's illustrations capture the hilarious nature of this eccentric family.

While the Pepins deal with extraordinary family problems, readers are introduced to the world of Vincent Luca, son of a famous New York mob boss and his so-called "family" problems in Gordon Korman's Son of the Mob: Hollywood Hustle (Hyperion). The first chapter of this young adult novel includes a suitcase filled with \$3 million dollars, a carjacking by an overweight Italian man, and the simple rule that one should never trust a man with a city as a last name. Wanting to distance himself from the family "business," Vince opts for starting his freshman year of college all the way across the country in California. He is joined by his girlfriend, Kendra, whose father happens to be the FBI agent who is in full pursuit of Vince's father; his best friend, Alex; and a crew of crazy characters that could be found on any college campus. The action is fast paced, and before the reader knows it, there is a missing union boss, visits from "Uncles," an older brother who takes over Vince's job and his dorm room, and a kleptomaniac roommate. Gordon Korman is at his comic best with this teen read.



Another great teen read is My Scrumptious Scottish Dumplings by Cherry Whytock (Simon and Schuster). With the popularity of "chick lit" in the adult fiction genre, it only seemed to be a matter of time before teen and young adult readers would have a Bridget Jones of their own. Teens will be immediately drawn to Angela Cookson Potts, known as



"Angel" to friends and family. She's a feisty, funny, and honest 15-year-old girl from England. In this second novel featuring Angel and her exploits, readers are treated with more recipes, more embarrassing moments, and even more lessons on what it is like to be a teen. Told in first-person diary format, the novel is littered with funny drawings of characters and incidents, Angel's favorite recipes and a hilarious story featuring her father's protest of incredibly bad

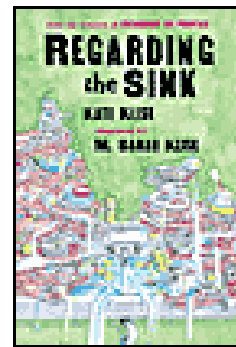
Haggis. Readers need not be familiar with Whytock's first novel, My Cup Runneth Over, but fans definitely will want to revisit Angel and her friends and family in this next, equally funny installment.

Brad Stanislawski hasn't even met his grandfather until the summer Mary Bartek describes in Funerals & Fly Fishing (Henry Holt). After Brad's mother left home with the high school sweetheart her father didn't approve, the two of them had little contact. Now she wants Brad to fly from Denver to the small town in Pennsylvania where she had grown up while she goes to California on a trip she had earned through her real estate work. Brad had thought sixth grade was terrible, but the idea of a summer "vacation" with an old man he doesn't know sounds positively awful. Just when he thinks things can't get worse, Brad finds out that his grandfather runs a funeral home. While the humor in the book isn't side-splitting, there are funny moments, such as Brad's discovery of the materials his grandfather uses to create fishing lures. No, the bag does not contain human hair, as one of the guys in town has led him to believe.



Brad also learns that standing up to teasing about his name and his stature means that he doesn't have to become the object of humor from others in his school.

To visit a school unlike any other, spend some time in the pages of Regarding the Sink by Kate Klise, with illustrations by M. Sarah Klise (Harcourt). The sister duo introduced Geyser Creek Middle School in Regarding the Fountain, and readers who enjoyed that book will have a definite advantage in tackling this episode because they know the main characters. However, it's easy enough to get the drift, and the unusual format will hook most readers anyway. Letters, e-mail messages, newspaper articles, diagrams, "photos" . . . There's not much here that resembles a conventional book page. When the sixth graders can't reach Florence Waters, the designer who came up with their spectacular fountain, they have to travel across the world to get her help in solving the problem of the smelly, clogged sink that is making school life miserable. What do Sinking Blinking Spotted Suckerfish have to do with the price of beans? And who knew that the crabby principal could be capable of unexpected generosity? There are no slow patches in this school story romp.



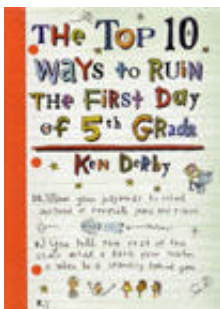
The old adage goes: "You can't judge a book by its cover." Yet, The Top 10 Ways to Ruin the First Day of 5th Grade (Holiday House) proves this adage wrong! Young readers will start laughing when they look at the cover and won't stop until they are done reading the final Top 10 List. Anthony Madison, or Tony Baloney (TB to his friends), is bound and determined to be on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. His

devotion to the goal lands him in some seriously

hysterical situations,| one involving a bear costume.

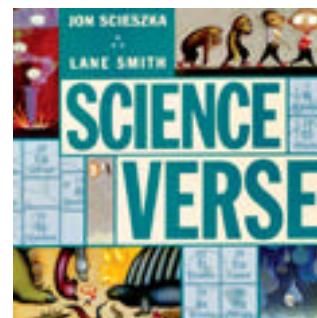
Some events seem a bit too fantastic at first, but after getting to know TB, it all seems plausible. With TB, Author Ken Derby has created one of the most charismatic troublemakers since Dennis the Menace and Calvin from *Calvin and Hobbes*. This is a great read for the youngster in all of us, especially if the word "hinder"

still makes us giggle; a sure hit with any upper elementary classroom or late night TV fan.



Another entertaining school story is the chapter book, Judy Moody, M.D.: the Doctor is in! written by Megan McDonald and illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds (Candlewick Press). In this chapter of Judy's life, her class is studying the Amazing Human Body. This gives Judy the license to steal her brother Stink's umbilical-cord-in-a-jar to show to her class, pencil a uni-brow onto her forehead while pretending to be Elizabeth Blackwell, recite the hippopotamus oath, and operate on a zucchini! The story coupled with Peter Reynold's illustrations give new breadth to medical profession!

The unfortunate student in Jon Scieszka's Science Verse (Viking) is doomed to hear poems about science everywhere he goes after his teacher proclaims that a person "can hear the poetry of science in everything." Older students and adults will have the most fun with this book because they will recognize the original poems that form the basis of the parodies. Of course, the deficiency could be remedied by a parent or teacher willing to find the originals. For example, "Scientific Method at the Bat" echoes the rhythm and story of the legendary Casey. Scieszka helpfully supplies notes about the originals on the final page. Lane Smith's zany illustrations work perfectly with the poetic send-ups. The book comes with a CD of the poems read by author and illustrator. Who says science is boring?

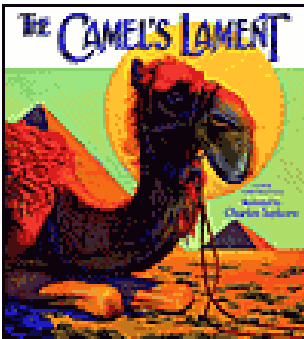


A great way for teachers to introduce kids to the question/answer and dialogue patterns that encourage critical thinking is by encouraging them to read joke books or riddles. Picture Window/Capstone has a funny new line of "Read-it! Joke Books." The series covers a range of topics from dinosaurs to monsters to school. One example is, School Buzz: Classy and Funny Jokes About School by Michael Dahl, illustrated by Jeff Yesh. Kids will find jokes such as, "What did the sloppy student get on his math test?" (Answer: "Peanut butter and jelly.") The series offers four different reading levels along with simple illustrations. Another similar series is the Kids Can Read Riddles published by Kids Can Press. Students will have fun

with Recess Riddles and Funtime Riddles by Marilyn Helmer, illustrated by Jane Kurisu that feature such riddles as, "Why couldn't the sailors play cards on the boat?" (Answer: "Because the captain was standing on the deck.")

Another enjoyable way to engage young readers is to introduce them to the world of nonsense verse. Edward Lear was a 19th-century master of nonsense verse, particularly limericks. Valorie Fisher has selected and illustrated 15 of them in a collection Nonsense! (Atheneum). Bright colors and bold patterns provide backgrounds for the poems themselves. The accompanying illustrations combine Victorian and modern images in deadpan interpretations of the preposterous poems. For example, a human-sized Bluebottle fly waltzes with a stylishly dressed young woman under the light of the moon. The information page about Lear's life and poetry may inspire readers to seek out additional examples.

A 19th-century American poet, Charles Edward Carryl, wrote nonsense verse reminiscent of the work of Lear and Lewis Carroll. Illustrator Charles Santore devotes an entire picture book to one of Carryl's humorous poems, The Camel's Lament (Random House). The unfortunate camel reveals the hardships of his life by comparing his situation to that of other animals. The overworked beast has no special diet and no shelter. Instead of a gorgeous, straight physique, a camel is "lumpy and bumpy and humpy." Santore's illustrations bring the poem to life. His exaggerated portraits of the fine aspects of other animals' lives make the camel's complaints even more ridiculous. Well-groomed poodles with huge napkins around their necks gaze at a tasty feast of chicken and cream while the camel chomps dispiritedly on tufts of spindly vegetation.



Carryl's poem about the unhappy camel is included in the anthology Fur, Fangs, and Footprints, compiled by Patricia M. Stockland (Compass Point). Stockland offers comments and questions about most of the poems about animals that she includes in this collection. Because this extra material is included at the bottom of the pages, children

can simply read the poems and enjoy the illustrations without feeling as though the process is a chore. Teachers will appreciate the suggestions for additional activities at the end of the book, where readers will also find a glossary of terms related to poetry.

The audience for What Will We Do with the Baby-O? is much too young to care about such definitions (Tundra). The rhymes and songs selected by Theo Heras include some that are familiar, such as "Hush Little Baby" and others that are not, such as "Little Tiny Baby Mousie." All of them have the notes for the melody line included at the end so that parents and older siblings can sing to toddlers. Jennifer Herbert's bright illustrations depict a lively family with twin girls and a younger brother interacting with their frazzled parents.



The humor is much more subtle in John Kelly and Cathy Tincknell's droll comedy, The Mystery of Eatum Hall (Candlewick). In fact, much of the fun lies in understatement and in what is left unsaid but told in the illustrations. Horace (a pig) and Glenda (a goose) Pork-Fowler are an aristocratic and very well-fed couple. Horace narrates the tale of their weekend at Dr. Hunter's fabulous Eatum Hall from the time they receive the unexpected invitation to their hasty departure. Of course, readers will recognize the danger and the identity of Dr. Hunter early in the story. However, the Pork-Fowlers seem oblivious to the numerous



paintings of wolves on the mansion's walls and the cameras and listening devices everywhere. They even chalk up the substitution of "meat" for "meet" in Dr. Hunter's note to lack of spelling ability. The illustrations offer views from Dr. Hunter's surveillance headquarters as well as straightforward renditions of the couple at feast and play. Details such as cookbook titles provide additional humor for older readers. How can Horace ignore the implications of Cook Your Goose or The Book of Bacon? In the end, it is Dr. Hunter who finds himself trapped in his dastardly pie-making machine.

While Eatum Hall takes readers inside the mind of the cunning Dr. Hunter, Down Girl and Sit: Smarter than Squirrels written by Lucy Nolan and illustrated by Mike Reed (Marshall Cavendish) gives readers a dog's perspective on life, which is not as cunning! Kids will laugh at the dog's eye point of view in this story and will be amused by the black and white comic illustrations. The narrator, Down Girl, barks at the newspaper boy to save her master from being spanked and eats donuts, coffee, or just about anything that has been left out on the counter because it surely has been left out for her! At one point, Down Girl even jokes with the neighbor dog, Sit, saying "Should we walk or take the car?" when venturing out to follow her master, who couldn't have left without her on purpose! This book will definitely have you laughing until its tail-end!

Speaking of tails, what do seven giraffes, an evil walrus, and a glass pie-plate-wearing elephant have in common? They are all characters in Gregory Maguire's hilarious new book, Leaping Beauty and Other Animal Fairy Tales (HarperCollins). Maguire, best known for his adult versions of fairy tales (Wicked, Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister), has created eight retellings of favorite tales. My favorite? *Hamster and Gerbil* because of its complete ridiculousness: a beaver family adopts a hamster and gerbil and almost gets eaten by a porcupine! This book is silly enough to keep the attention of even the youngest of readers (and listeners), and the humor is subtle enough to garner several snickers from adults. Stories about the *Three Little Penguins*, *Rumplesnakeskin*, and *So What and the Seven Giraffes* are sure to delight fans of all ages who appreciate comedy, fairy tales and animal stories.

