

BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's & Young Adult Books

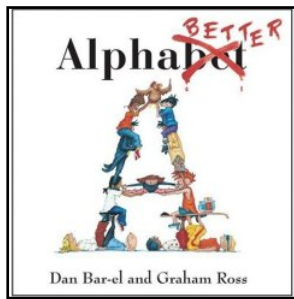
Minnesota State University, Mankato

February 2007

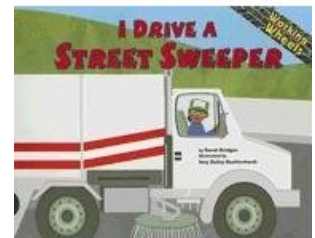
With this first issue of **Book Notes** for 2007, we are trying a new approach. Instead of having reviews tied together thematically throughout the newsletter, they will be divided into broad age categories and arranged alphabetically by author's last name. Of course, many books don't fit neatly into categories so you probably will want to read all the reviews to decide which books you might purchase. Complete bibliographic information appears at the end of the newsletter, after all the reviews.

Books for Preschool and Primary Grades

Alphabetter, by Dan Bar-el is an alphabet book about twenty-six children who have one thing but lack something else: "Alberto had an alligator, but he didn't have a bathing suit. Benoit had a bathing suit, but he didn't have a clarinet." After progressing all the way through the alphabet, the children learn to share what they have, quickening the pace of the story in the last three pages. Graham Ross' illustrations place emphasis on the alphabet. One letter per page is prominently displayed in the upper left-hand corner. In addition, he has hidden each letter somewhere in each illustration. The illustrations suggest movement since there are no distinct borders. The children portrayed in each illustration come from different ethnic groups. The book would be appropriate for early elementary students who enjoy funny stories and look-and-find books and can already identify the letters of the alphabet (Orca).—NS

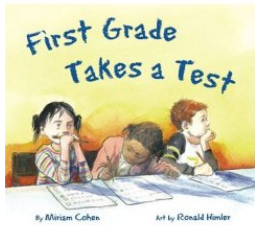


Sarah Bridges introduces young readers to the workings of a large machine they might see in their neighborhood in *I Drive a Street Sweeper* (Picture Window). Information about how the street sweeper works is provided in a first-person account by the driver, Tami. She explains how various features of the street sweeper operate and how the trash collected by the machine is taken for disposal. The well-designed book has larger type for Tami's words, which provide adequate information for the youngest listeners. Each double-page spread also includes a box with additional related facts for those who want to know more about the topic. Amy Bailey Muehlenhardt's attractive illustrations clearly present the machine's work and are large enough to share with a group. One clever touch is the tire tread inside the front and back covers. A diagram of the street sweeper with labeled parts, plus a set of facts and suggestions for other sources of information follow. This volume is part of the Working Wheels Series, which includes books on a tractor, dump truck, ambulance, fire engine, and other vehicles.—KP



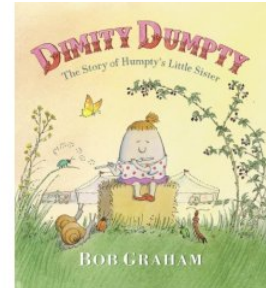
Although Miriam Cohen's account of how *First Grade Takes a Test* was originally published 25 years ago, the current emphasis on assessment makes its message as timely as ever.

Ronald Himler has supplied new illustrations, and the entire book from Star Bright is in a larger format, which lends itself to read-aloud sharing. The teacher’s reassurances about test results may provide comfort to listeners as it does to her own fictional class.

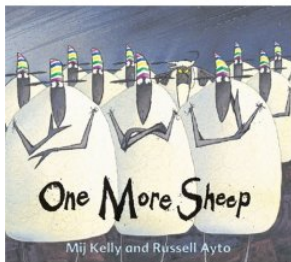


“The test doesn’t tell everything.” The worries, frustrations, and sadness of students ring true after they learn that Anna Marie’s test results have placed her in a special class for high-achieving students. Jim’s ingenuity in figuring out how to see if two cookies are the same size demonstrates the power of creative thinking in problem solving.—KP

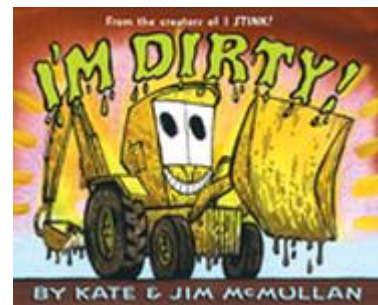
Almost every child knows the rhyme about Humpty Dumpty, but until now no one has heard the tale of *Dimity Dumpty*, Humpty’s little sister. Bob Graham’s humorous picture book supplies the details (Candlewick). The Dumpty family performs with a traveling circus. Although Humpty and his parents enjoy the spotlight and attention for their thrilling tricks, Dimity stays on the sidelines and practices playing her tiny flute. However, after her brother’s foolhardiness results in his fall, her decisive actions lead to his rescue and recovery. Graham’s droll illustrations bring the implausible situations to life. The Dumptys’ vehicle is an egg carton on wheels, pulled by a hen in harness. Among the humorous scenes is the gathering around Humpty’s hospital bed, with soldiers (and horse) offering flowers while assorted circus performers lend their support to the tiny family. Sheer fun.—KP



One More Sheep by Mij Kelly and Russell Ayto was shortlisted for the 2005 Kate Greenaway Medal, and anyone who appreciates witty picture books will quickly discover why (Peachtree). Kelly’s rhymed text introduces readers to Sam, a not-so-bright shepherd whose inability to stay awake almost leads to disaster. After bringing in his flock from the “wet, windy moor,” Sam tries to count them to make sure they are all safe, but everyone knows what happens when a human tries to count sheep. . . . When a loud knock at the door reveals a sheep outside in the cold, Sam is ready to let the newcomer inside. Fortunately, the real sheep recognize a wolf in disguise and devise a plan to keep Sam awake long enough to realize the danger. Ayto’s illustrations of the sheep in their woolly socks and hats and Sam in his striped pajamas ensure a countless number of enjoyable readings.—KP



Kate and Jim McMullan, who provided a garbage truck’s view of the world in *I Stink!* give voice to a backhoe loader in *I’m Dirty!* (HarperCollins). This multi-armed, versatile, and noisy machine tackles a junk-filled lot and has a glorious, dirty time in the process. His first assignment is counting down to remove piles of junk like “7 loused-up lawn chairs” and “2 tossed-out toilet seats.” After depositing the trash in a dumpster, it’s time for the DIRTY part of the job: stump removal. The process involves lots of digging and pulling, accompanied by plenty of noise. Then it’s time for a mud bath before smoothing the empty lot. The Backhoe Loader’s “facial” expressions reveal its delight in every task, particularly those that result in getting dirty. Preschoolers who revel in sound effects and grime will delight in the exploits of this multi-talented machine.—KP

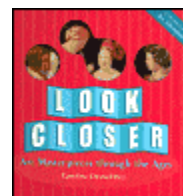


Books for Elementary and Middle School Readers

Flamingos on the Roof is a collection of thirty poems and paintings by Calef Brown (Houghton Mifflin). The poems feature silly subjects and people that will capture children's attention from the titles to the final line. "Bug Show," "Bob," and "Allicatter Gatorpillar" are three such poems. The poems are primarily free verse, although Brown does use slant rhyme to establish some structure. The slant rhymes help unify each poem and provide repetition of sounds which children naturally enjoy. Because of the frequency of slant rhymes, these poems would work well as a bridge between units on rhymed poems and poems that had no rhymes at all. The illustrations acquire depth through Brown's use of a technique in which the images appear layered on top of each other. Each painting visually creates the mood of the poem with which it is paired. This book would work well with children around the ages of eight to ten.—NS



Caroline Desnoëttes offers a unique introduction to paintings in *Look Closer: Art Masterpieces through the Ages* (Walker & Co.). In this interactive book, readers explore 18 European paintings ranging from the 15th-century work of Jan van Eyck to the 20th-century paintings of Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, and others. One side of each double-page spread features the entire painting. On the facing page, two flaps contain close-up images of some of the paintings details. They open to reveal text that contains suggestions for activities related to the painting plus facts about the work itself. Readers who want even more information will find it in the final pages of the book, which discuss the artist and the painting, including where it is currently housed. Although the suggested activities seem to be aimed at elementary school students, the book is also a valuable resource for older readers who want a basic introduction to artistic styles in various time periods.—KP



Russell Freedman's book, *The Adventures of Marco Polo*, explores the ongoing debate concerning the fact or fiction of Marco Polo's remarkable claims (Scholastic). Freedman takes readers on the fantastic voyages that some critics claim cannot be true. Marco Polo, called "the man of a million lies," insisted as he lay dying that his book, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, covered only a fraction of the wonders he had seen. Freedman presents Marco Polo's known life and the adventures he shared with his father and uncle. They encountered bitter cold in the mountains of Hindu Kush and harsh heat in the Taklimakan Desert. After they arrived at Kublai Kahn's court, Kahn gave them apartments in his palace. They attended lavish banquets for 6,000 guests. They learned of innovations such as using paper to replace silver and gold as currency and observed China's postal system, which predated the pony express with its relay stations. In spite of his great wealth, Khan ruled wisely, sharing his crops with the hungry and caring for and educating homeless children. So, did Marco Polo write fact or fiction? Freedman does a remarkable job sharing the pros and cons of his assertions, and Bagram Ibatoulline's illustrations add depth and richness to the tale. Whether Marco Polo told the truth or lied, no one may ever know. But historians know beyond doubt that he changed the way Europeans thought about the rest of the world.—MF

Frances Hardinge's *Fly by Night*, introduces twelve-year-old Mo Mye at the start of the 18th century in England (HarperCollins). She lives with her aunt and uncle after her father's

death. Having learned to read from her father, she misses books, which have been banned. Consequently, she schemes to release an itinerant thief, Eponymous Clent, from the stockades because the words he uses remind her of the books her father taught her. Mo and Clent flee to London, where people have waited for decades for parliament to declare a new king or queen. Amidst the schemes of various workmen’s guilds and the devotion people have to the little gods they call the Beloved, Mo soon finds herself in a game of deadly intrigue as guild members plot to gain or regain their lost powers. Mo has the ear of Lady Tamarind, whom she and Clent helped when the lady’s carriage needed a new wheel, but is the Lady a friend or foe? Whom should Mo believe? What power do words wield? Why are names so important? What truth lies behind each guild? Can she trust Clent, who may be a murderer? The intrigue builds steadily to the final pages. Hardinge tells a thrilling tale, sharing laughter and tears, devotion and betrayal, mindless opportunities and rational misgivings as Mo begins thinking for herself...the very reason her father taught her to read. Now, more than ever, that gift might save her life.—MF



The Keeker chapter book series written by Hadley Higginson and illustrated by Maja Andersen is wonderful (Chronicle). After reading one, you will want to read them all. In *Keeker and the Sugar Shack*, Catherine Corey Keegan Dana, otherwise known as Keeker, lives in



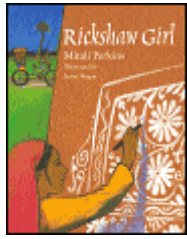
Vermont with her parents and a slew of pets ranging from dogs, to a goldfish, to her pony, Plum. Keeker and Plum are bored during mud season until a stranger buys the run-down Crab Apple Hill Farm nearby. After Keeker learns that a woman as old as her grandma has bought the farm, she decides that the woman must be a witch. When Keeker and Plum investigate, they discover both who the new owner is and what she is doing in the sugar shack! Andersen’s comic, whimsical, and sweet line drawings enhance Higginson’s humorous narrative.

For example, when Keeker is bored, she runs around with “panty hose on her head pretending to have long braids like Laura Ingalls.” The illustrations show Keeker and three of her dogs with pantyhose on their heads. The work of this writer-and-illustrator team will leave readers smiling.—TS

In the middle-grade novel, *The Higher Power of Lucky* by Susan Patron, Lucky uses her cleaning job at Hard Pan’s Found Object Wind Chime Museum and Visitor Center to eavesdrop on attendees’ stories during various twelve-step anonymous meetings (Simon & Schuster).

Lucky’s favorite story, told by Short Sammy, chronicles how he hit rock bottom, found his Higher Power, and quit drinking. Lucky decides that if she could find her Higher Power, “she’d be able to figure out the difference between the things she could change and the things she couldn’t.” For instance, what about the fact that her mother died, and her father, whom she had never met, sent a guardian, Brigitte, to her from France? When Brigitte begins an online course in restaurant management, Lucky fears Brigitte wants to return home and even more that Brigitte will leave her. Lucky lets these thoughts and many others drift through the crevices of her brain, but she doesn’t share them with her friend, Lincoln, an avid enough knot tier, or with Miles, who always asks for cookies. Instead, Lucky decides to run away. When she does, she comes to terms with the circumstances of her life through a series of unexpected events. Patron develops memorable characters in the down-and-out town of Hard Pan, and they all come together to create a heartfelt, hopeful story. Matt Phalen’s pencil drawings enrich the experience in this Newbery Award book.—TS





Views about contributions of girls and women to a family’s economic prosperity are undergoing change in some countries, thanks to the use of microfinance. Naima, a 10-year-old Bangladeshi girl finds that out for herself in *Rickshaw Girl* by Mitali Perkins (Charlesbridge). Frustrated because she cannot help her father earn money by driving a rickshaw like her neighbor Saleem does to aid his father, Naima comes up with a plan to disguise herself as a boy. Unfortunately, her attempt ends disastrously by crashing the rickshaw, which will need an expensive repainting. In the past Naima’s artistic abilities have brought her attention in the village, but her discovery that she can use her skills to work for a woman setting up a rickshaw repair business opens new possibilities for herself and her family. The large type and Jamie Hogan’s black-and-white drawings will help those in lower and middle elementary grades follow Naima’s story. In an author’s note, Perkins explains the basic ideas behind microfinance as well as her own familiarity with Bangladesh. - KP

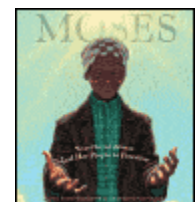
Arrrgh, Matey, if you are looking for guidance, *How to be a Pirate in 7 Days or Less* by Lesley Rees and illustrated by Jan Lewis is the book for you (Kingfisher).

Captain Kid, his first mate, Barnacle Billy, and the parrot, Poopdeck, will lead you through all the steps you need to become a full-fledged pirate. First, you’ll need a name, preferably one that tells others something about yourself, such as “Blackbeard” or “Pegleg Pete.” From there, you can complete all sorts of simple craft projects that will enhance your voyage such as a creating a “porthole doorplate,” putting together a costume, and making a cardboard cutlass and treasure chest. You’ll even find the makings of a party, complete with recipes for “grub.” Lewis’ comic illustrations add to the fun while guiding readers through the steps needed to create everything required to plunge into piracy. Because the book includes an eye patch, pirate hat, poster, stickers, a skull-and-crossbones pattern, and other items designed for a single reader, libraries and media centers may want to remove them before circulating the book. The “extras” aren’t essential for readers to follow the book’s directions, although they would add to the fun for someone purchasing the book for individual use. –TS



Minnesota author Norma Sommerdorf takes readers to 1846 in her novel, *Red River Girl* (Holiday House). After the death of her Ojibwe mother, 13-year-old Josette Dupre must assume the care of her two younger brothers as they travel with their French voyageur father from the Red River settlement in Canada to the newly-established town of St. Paul. Josette despairs that she will ever have a chance to return to school, but her ability to speak several languages brings her to the attention of Harriet Bishop, a pioneer in Minnesota education. Although Josette’s character is fiction, Sommerdorf includes lots of historical detail about life in the era for both Indians and white settlers. As such, the book could supplement the elementary school curriculum about Minnesota history and serve as a read-aloud choice for classroom teachers.—KP

Except for books about specific holidays or celebrations, picture books by mainstream publishers seldom feature the role of religious faith in people’s lives. A notable exception is the stunning picture book for older readers by Carole Boston Weatherford and Kadir Nelson, *Moses*, based on the life of Harriet Tubman (Hyperion). The ongoing communication of Tubman and the Lord is depicted through the use of typography, with capitalized words signifying the voice of God and italics indicating Tubman’s thoughts and prayers. Because Tubman had to travel by night to flee from her



own master and later lead others to freedom, many illustrations are dark. The startling sunlight when she reaches the “Promised Land” of Philadelphia fills her hands with gold. An extensive author’s note after the picture book text provides many more details about Tubman’s life and work, which will enhance the book’s value for elementary school students looking for information for reports. The book earned recognition as both a Caldecott Honor Book and the winner of the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award.—KP

Books for Young Adults

Deborah Ellis is most famous for her Breadwinner trilogy, and now that she’s explored Afghanistan, she’s ready to move on to Bolivia with her new character Diego in *I Am a Taxi* (Groundwood). Diego, a twelve-year-old boy, starts the novel in prison with his mother, who has been falsely convicted of smuggling drugs. Working as a “taxi,” Diego runs errands for people within the prison walls and attends school when he can. However, it is not long before his friend Mando convinces him that there are easier ways to earn money. Diego is wisely hesitant to want to work for drug smugglers, but eventually the allure of easy money is too much. Unfortunately, the boys find out that Diego’s suspicions were correct. The children consume drugs to make the drudgery of their work pass more quickly, and eventually they make a break for it. While this novel can be read by itself, it is clearly the start of a series. *I Am a Taxi* provides a fascinating glimpse inside the culture of Bolivia as well as some insight into the world of drugs. It is a great novel for young adult and adult readers. Ellis does use language that might be a bit strong for younger readers. —MM



K. L. Going’s *Saint Iggy*, tells the story of a sixteen-year-old ninth grader (Harcourt). Iggy’s recent suspension from school makes him determined to contribute to society to redeem himself. Unfortunately, Iggy has no resources. His father is a drunk and his mother, a missing junkie. Besides that, they have no money and live in the Projects at the bottom of the social ladder. Iggy’s only friend also lives in a cold, poorly-furnished apartment. Twenty-year-old Mo, a college drop-out and the son of wealthy parents, “is into renouncing things for spiritual reasons.” Because both young men need money and food, they turn to Mo’s mother, who welcomes them warmly. Mo and Iggy imagine living one another’s lives. Iggy envisions warmth, food, and shelter while Mo visualizes a life where nothing would be expected of him. They come to realize they know nothing about one another’s lives or the challenges each faces. While Iggy tries in vain to think of a way to make his contribution to society, an unlikely circumstance presents itself, and in a sudden moment of selflessness, he discovers a strength he didn’t know he had.—MF



In *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk with You*, Hanna Jansen relates the horror of the Rwandan genocide through the eyes of her adopted daughter Jeanne d’Arc, who miraculously survived in spite of losing her parents, brother, sister, and extended family (Lerner). Through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl, the reader glimpses the horrors and confusion a child faces when Hutu neighbors and friends turn on one another to massacre and steal the fruits of the Tutsi labor. Jealousy and greed stalk the streets, and Jeanne sees the slaughter of men, women, and children who had the misfortune to be born in the Tutsi tribe. However, when the Rebel Army arrives, the slaughter reverses, and the child cannot make sense of the carnage and



anger. Nor can she understand why a brother would slaughter his sister's three-year-old child because the father belonged to the wrong tribe. Jeanne lived through humiliation, hunger, malaria, a near-death illness, and an apathy that sought to kill her spirit before finding a new chance for her life: a relative in Europe who must certainly still be alive! Her aunt helped Jeanne untangle her feelings and put them in order by writing the book. By remembering, Jeanne learns, "Only at the very worst moment can you tell friend from foe."—MF

Firestorm, Book I of David Klass' *The Caretaker Trilogy X*, tells the story of Jack Danielson, an 18-year-old jock who likes "chicks, flicks, and fast cars, roughly in that order" (Farrar Straus Giroux). However, Jack's life turns upside-down after playing his greatest high school football game. When he returns home after the game, his father and mother tell him they are not his parents and that he must leave them immediately because he is being hunted by murderers. Jack has a quest he must accomplish. He ponders his weird instructions as his "father" drives desperately to the marina and throws Jack onto a boat while crazed men pursue them. Lost and alone, Jack speeds into the darkness and tries to make sense of his life—at least, the life he thought was his—but he has no time and nowhere to go.



Whoever wants him dead is after him and seems to know where Jack will be. Through unlikely companions, a dog nearly three feet tall named Gisco, who communicates telepathically, and a young woman named Eko, sent to teach him how to fight and survive, Jack learns he must find Firestorm. His companions, who call him the Prince and the Beacon of Hope, will not tell him what Firestorm is, where it is, or who he is, but the fate of the world hangs in the balance while he scrambles to stay one step ahead of the hunters who would tear him apart for sport. People have raped the planet, and Jack must come to Earth's defense while trying to decipher his role in this unexpected nightmare. Klass keeps readers turning pages as they wonder with Jack what on Earth is going on. Readers will find themselves anxiously awaiting book two of the trilogy.—MF

The above book reviews were written by:

KP—Kathy Piehl, CCYAB Director

MF—Marge Freking, Adjunct Instructor, Colleges of Arts and Humanities and Business

MM – Michael MacBride, English Department Teaching Assistant

NS – Natalie Stowe, English Department Teaching Assistant

TS —Trisha Shaskan, English Department Teaching Assistant and Children's Book Author

Bibliography

Bar-el, Da. *Alphabetter*. Illus. by Graham Ross. Orca Book Publishers, 2006. ISBN 1551434393. \$17.95.

Bridges, Sarah. *I Drive a Street Sweeper*. Illus. by Amy Muehlenhardt. Picture Window, 2006. ISBN 1-4048-1608-9. \$ 7.95.

Brown, Calef. *Flamingos on the Roof*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006. ISBN 0618562982. \$16.00.

Cohen, Miriam. *First Grade Takes a Test*. Illus. by Ronald Himler. Star Bright Books, 2006. ISBN 1-59572-054-5. \$ 15.95.

Desnoëttes, Caroline. *Look Closer: Art Masterpieces through the Ages*. Walker & Co., 2006. ISBN 0-8027-9614-1. \$18.95

Ellis, Deborah. *I Am a Taxi*. Groundwood Books, 2006. ISBN 00-88899-735-3. \$16.95

Freedman, Russell. *The Adventures of Marco Polo*. Illus. by Bagram Ibatoulline. Scholastic, 2006. ISBN 0-439-52394 - X

Graham, Bob. *Dimity Dumpty*. Candlewick Press, 2006. ISBN 0-7636-3078-0. \$ 15.99.

Going, K.L. *Saint Iggy*. Harcourt, 2006. ISBN 0-15-205795-1. \$ 17.00.

Hardinge, Frances. *Fly by Night*. HarperCollins, 2005. ISBN 0-06-087627-1. \$ 16.99.

Higginson, Hadley. *Keeker and the Sugar Shack*. Illus. by Maja Anderson. Chronicle, 2006. ISBN 0-8118-5455-8. \$ 15.50.

Jansen, Hanna. *Over a Thousand Hills I Walk With You*. Lerner, 2006. ISBN 1-57505-927-4. \$16.95.

Klass, David. *Firestorm*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2006. ISBN 0-374-32307-0. \$17.00.

Mij, Kelly. *One More Sheep*. Illus. by Russell Ayto. Peachtree, 2006. ISBN 156145378-1. \$ 16.95.

McMullan, Kate. *I'm Dirty!* Illus. by Jim McMullan. HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-009293-9. \$ 16.99.

Patron, Susan. *The High Power of Lucky*. Illus. by Matt Phelan. Simon & Schuster, 2006. ISBN 1-4169-0194-9. \$16.95.

Perkins, Mitali. *Rickshaw Girl*. Illus. by Jamie Hogan. Charlesbridge, 2007. ISBN 978-1-58089-308-4. \$ 13.95.

Rees, Lesley. *How to be a Pirate in 7 Days or Less*. Illus. by Jan Lewis. Kingfisher, 2006. ISBN 0-7534-6041-6. \$12.95.

Sommerdorf, Norma. *Red River Girl*. Holiday House, 2006. ISBN 0-8234-1903-7. \$ 16.95.

Weatherford, Carole Boston. *Moses*. Illus. by Kadir Nelson. Hyperion, 2006. ISBN 078685175-9. \$ 15.99.

