

# ***BOOK NOTES***

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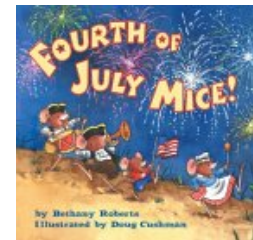
**Center for Children's/Young Adult Books**

**Minnesota State University, Mankato**

**March 2005**

Children's book authors and publishers often use holidays as a theme of both fiction and nonfiction books. This issue of Book Notes includes reviews of some of the many books about holidays that arrived during the past few months. Although some holidays have so many books published annually that several pages could be devoted to them, we have tried to feature a variety of holidays that occur at various times of the year.

Although we're still caught in winter in Minnesota, books can transport us to the sultry weather of summer. The Holiday Mice of Bethany Roberts and Doug Cushman celebrate the national holiday by staging a parade in Fourth of July Mice! (Houghton Mifflin). After the four mice march by an enthusiastic crowd, they spend the rest of the day in old-fashioned activities such as picnicking, playing baseball, and swimming. They end the day of celebration by watching a fireworks show. KP



Mice aren't the only ones who have parades for the Fourth of July. Kathy Whitehead's Looking for Uncle Louie on the Fourth of July (Boyd's Mills Press) gives readers a colorful and festive look at one holiday parade in Texas. Joe is watching the festivities with his parents, patiently waiting for a glimpse of his Uncle Louie. Bands, floats, and horses pass by, but when the low-rider cars approach, Joe gets quite a surprise. This elementary school read has bright, eye-catching illustrations with a southwestern flair. MG

This kind of community gathering is just the sort of Fourth of July celebration 10-year-old Ben has always enjoyed in his rural Florida town. However, this year is different, as Elizabeth Starr Hill reveals in her chapter book, Wildfire! (Farrar Straus, and

Giroux). Now Ben needs to impress Elliott, a boy from the big city, who makes it clear that his new home doesn't live up to his former one. Ben, who has lived with his great-grandmother and grandparents since his parents' death six years earlier, has always looked forward to fireworks. However, this year's dry weather has made the surrounding woods and grasslands a tinderbox, and all fires have been banned. Goaded by Elliott, he sets off one rocket. Not only does the noise scare the stray pup Ben wants for his own, but sparks start a fire that has the potential for real disaster. There's plenty of action to keep beginning readers following the adventure, especially when Ben and Elliott get lost while searching for the dog. Rob Shepperson's black and white drawings add interest and help the transition from picture books to independent reading. KP



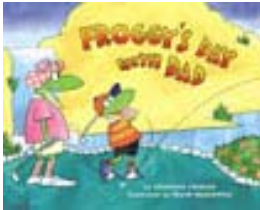
Grandparents play a major role in books about other holidays too. Teresa Bateman sets April Foolishness on an old-fashioned farm in her book from Albert Whitman. While Grandpa makes breakfast, his two grandkids keep running in with reports of one barnyard disaster after another. The chickens are loose. The pigs are eating the tomatoes. The sheep are munching the neighbors' lawn. Grandpa appears unflappable, assembling eggs, bacon, and toast. As he tells Grandma, "Ignore them, I say. They're trying to trick me. It's April Fools' Day!" Co-conspirator, Grandma, claims that he's a day early, and as he bolts to the well-tended barnyard, she and the kids have the last laugh. Nadine Bernard Westcott's zany illustrations provide bushels of good-humored fun and reward repeated viewings. The text itself has well-developed connections. News of the goats' departure is followed by Grandpa's slicing goat cheese, for example. When he learns about the sheep, he puts on his sweater. KP



Grandpa is the star of Vivian French's book from Candlewick that would be a good choice for Grandparents' Day or Father's Day. In I Love You, Grandpa, the title character arrives to spend the weekend with his four grandchildren. After the mother of the feline family leaves for work, the four rambunctious kittens head outside. Grandpa

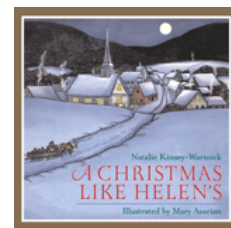
can't keep up with Rex and his soccer moves, twirl Queenie's jump rope correctly, or jump on Flora's bouncing ball. In fact, he and the youngest kitten, Stanley, are always left behind. Yet, Stanley has a song of appreciation that settles them all down for a well-deserved nap. Dana Kubick's illustrations of this adorable cat family extend not only through the full-color text pages but into black-and-white "photos" on the end papers. KP

Another Father's Day choice is Froggy's Day with Dad by Jonathan London (Viking). Those familiar with Froggy's previous adventures will not be surprised that his outing with Dad doesn't go smoothly. In fact, the day holds one unpleasant surprise after



another from shells in the scrambled eggs to collisions with the bumper boat at the amusement park. After a miniature golf game that leaves Dad with a lump on his noggin and Froggy with seven balls retrieved from a pond, the duo return home. Mom's cookies and Froggy's hand-painted mug, "To the Best Dad I Ever Had" make the day come out right after all. Frank Remkiewicz's illustrations extend the fun with the hapless amphibian family. KP

Natalie Kinsey-Warnock's memories of her grandmother form the basis for a nostalgic holiday look at A Christmas like Helen's (Houghton Mifflin). Set on a Vermont farm in the days "before cars, or telephones, or electricity," the book recalls the pleasures of listening to stories by the cook stove, snowshoeing in search of the perfect Christmas tree, skating on the pond with cousins, and traveling to Christmas Eve services in a pung pulled by sturdy horses. Mary Azarian's woodcut illustrations, tinted with watercolors, complement the text perfectly. Of course, trudging a mile through snow to a one-room schoolhouse and keeping a barn clean probably weren't quite as idyllic as the pictures would have us believe. However, this is a book for quiet sharing between generations with time to reflect on memories. KP



Another quiet holiday book that features a Grandma on her farm is the chapter book, Birthday Pony (HarperCollins), by Jessie Haas. Since Popcorn the pony was born

on Jane's birthday, Jane's Grandma Aggie wanted Jane to ride her, but Jane lived too far away. In Jane's absence, Grandma Aggie sold Popcorn. In the meantime, Jane rode the stick pony that Grandma Aggie sent her and rode the horses on the merry-go-rounds.

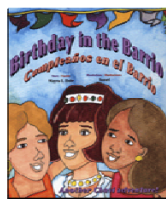
Each year, when Grandma Aggie visited Jane on her birthday, she gave Jane horse models and videos. Jane loved them. Finally, Jane's family moved close to Grandma Aggie's house. Grandma Aggie bought

Popcorn back and gave the pony to Jane on her tenth birthday. At first, Jane wasn't able to ride Popcorn, a stubborn horse that was accustomed to doing what he wanted. Through training and patience, Jane and

Popcorn grew to understand each other's wishes and listen to each other. Young readers will enjoy this quiet story of friendship and Margot Apple's delightful black and white illustrations that accompany it. TS



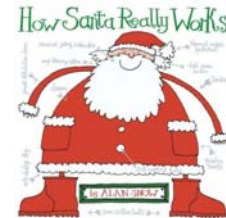
While The Birthday Pony is a quiet story of friendship, Birthday in the Barrio or Compleanos en el Barrio, written by Mayra L. Dole and illustrated by Tonel (Children's Book Press) is a loud, festive story of friendship and community. The story, told in English and Spanish, is about a girl named Lazarita who wants her parents to throw a big fiesta to celebrate her quinces, her fifteenth birthday. Her family is too poor to host a big fiesta, so Lazarita's sister Rosario enlists the help of her friend Chavi to plan a surprise party. The two girls start by asking their friend, Dalili's mom, who works at a homeless



**Birthday in the Barrio**  
Compleanos en el Barrio

shelter, to help with the food. Dalili's mom says that she would help, but she is too busy trying to raise money for the homeless shelter. Chavi has the idea to combine the birthday party with a fundraiser for the homeless shelter. The girls reach out to members of the community to help make the puerco asada and cake but their plans for the party are blocked when they find out that it is too late to get a street permit. In the end, it is Rosario, Chavi, and Lazarita who are surprised by the adults who get the permit and throw the party. Dole's rhythmic language combined with Tonel's cartoon-like illustrations make this an enjoyable story for young readers. TS

Another book that features lively illustrations is Alan Snow's How Santa Really Works (Atheneum). Snow provides an inside look at all the high-tech (and low-tech) methods Santa and his elves use to keep the production and delivery of toys flowing smoothly. The elementary school crowd will be intrigued by the details of how elves are trained, how letters are sorted and entered into computer data banks, how presents are wrapped and organized, and how all the other facets of Santa's operations are handled. Because each page is crammed with small drawings and lots of dialogue boxes, the book is designed for one person or a couple friends to explore the inner workings of life at the North Pole. KP



Like Snow's how-to manual, traditional Christmas stories usually involve the male protagonists of the season. Santa Claus, Frosty, Rudolph, and Scrooge are just a few examples. Yet, Brittney Ryan takes another route with her young adult novel, The Legend of Holly Claus (Harper Collins). This gorgeous novel (cover art and illustrations included) is about the daughter of Santa, the King of Forever. Holly has been cursed by an evil wizard who has encased her heart in ice. The book chronicles her growth and struggle to rid herself and her land from the curse. With a glossary of characters and places along with a web address to get more information, Legend of Holly Claus is rich in its details and ideas. The book embodies the spirit of Christmas and gives readers young and old something a little more unconventional than standard Christmas literature. MG



While Ryan reinvents Christmas in Holly Claus, there are other holiday books that definitely try to convey basic facts about holidays. That doesn't mean there isn't room for fun, however. Wendie Old's The Groundhog Day Book of Facts and Fun offers plenty of information with some jokes and puns along the way (Albert Whitman). The author discusses the most famous groundhog, Punxsatawney Phil, who appears in

Pennsylvania each February, and explains how he earned that coveted attention. Then she ranges more broadly to explain topics such as seasonal changes, groundhog life, and origins of spring holidays. Paige Billin-Frye’s lively illustrations add to the fun. There are even directions on how to stage a Groundhog Day Party, complete with a pattern for invitations and directions for games. KP

Gail Gibbons gives a simple overview of a more widely celebrated holiday in Thanksgiving is . . . from Holiday House. After explaining that harvest celebrations have taken place for thousands of years, Gibbons turns to basic



information about the Pilgrims’ journey and their settlement in Plymouth Colony. Much of the book is devoted to contemporary versions of the holiday with family gatherings and plenty of food. She introduces each topic with “Thanksgiving is . . .” and supplies most of the detail in pictures, not words. The book could serve as a foundation for pre-school and primary grade conversations about this specific holiday and other family gatherings. KP

More basic and straightforward explanations of holidays are offered in the Holidays Series from Compass Point. In addition to the standard holidays, the series includes some less familiar ones. For example, Juneteenth by Natalie M. Rosinsky provides background on the origin of the celebration. Rosinsky explains the end to slavery announced in the Emancipation Proclamation and the joy that accompanied the reading of that document in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865. She draws parallels between that celebration and more contemporary observances, explaining how some traditions have developed. In Presidents’ Day, another title in the series, she discusses how the holiday expanded from celebrations of the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to a more general recognition honoring all U.S. presidents. KP

My First Chinese New Year by Karen Katz (Henry Holt) also introduces a less familiar holiday. The simple text and bright, colorful illustrations make this a great book to read to preschoolers. The story follows a



young girl through the preparations and festivities that accompany Chinese New Year. She buys quince blossoms with her dad, makes an altar with her grandfather, gets new clothes from her mom, eats food with her family, and ends up in Chinatown at a parade. This book introduces younger children to Chinese New Year and to Chinese culture. TS

Another book that would make a pleasant addition to any preschool classroom is Mouse's Halloween Party written by Jeanne Modesitt and illustrated by Robin Spowart (Boyd's Mills Press). Mouse is very excited when his mama agrees to let him have a Halloween party. He goes from house to house inviting his friends: Hedgehog, Bunny,



Mole, Squirrel and finally Pig. Everyone is excited except for Pig because she was planning to have a Halloween party too. After some deliberation, Mouse decides to ask Pig to co-host the Halloween Party. Pig likes the idea, so together they throw the best Halloween Party ever.

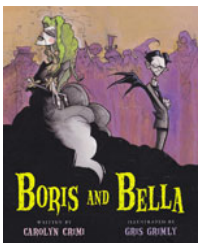
In addition to Spowart's soft, enchanting pastels, readers will also enjoy the two Halloween games described in the back of the book. TS

Friendship and Halloween also form the basis of Pumpkin Cat, written by Ann Turner and illustrated by Amy June Bates (Hyperion). One rainy night, a ginger cat crept into the return box at the library for shelter. When the librarians, Lisa and Rochelle, found her, they took her in, fed her, gave her a soft basket, and named her Pumpkin Cat. However, Pumpkin Cat didn't feel at home until a group of second graders visited the library and a girl named Charlotte held Pumpkin Cat on her lap. Still, Pumpkin Cat was lonely at night when the library was empty. On Halloween Day, the second graders came back. Charlotte read Pumpkin Cat's fortune, predicting, "Today, you will find your heart's desire." Later, when the children left, the librarians found a basket on the steps of the library. The basket contained a kitten with a note that said the kitten's name was Halloween Cat. When Pumpkin Cat sniffed the basket, she picked up the kitten, brought her in the library, and finally felt at home. The wistful illustrations that are done in watercolor complement the poetic text. TS

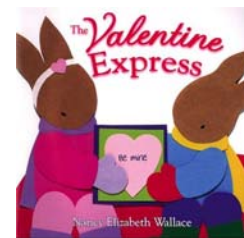


While Pumpkin Cat and Mouse's Halloween Party focus on the camaraderie that takes place on Halloween, Barbara Park's chapter book Junie B., First Grader: Boo...and I MEAN IT! (Random House) tackles the fears that Halloween evokes. Being scared of Halloween isn't all that uncommon, and Junie B. Jones is no exception. Upon discovering that candy corn is not corn, and that real witches, monsters, and ghosts go out at night trick-or-treating in their clothes because they don't need to wear costumes. Junie B. tries to come up with the creepiest costume to outscare anyone in this latest installment in the series. The book is funny and sweet with the trademark Junie B. innocence and humor. Denise Brunkus' illustrations will entertain young readers. MG

Who said Halloween couldn't be about romance? In this creepy and charming story, the old adage of "opposites attract" rings true. The picture book Boris and Bella (Harcourt) by Carolyn Crimi and illustrated by Gris Grimly is the tale of two very different ghouls: Boris, incredibly tidy, and Bella, incredibly messy. They can't stand one another. When a Halloween Party suddenly brings them together, the sparks and spider webs fly. This is a delightful read for second graders and up. Gris Grimly's illustrations characterize Boris and Bella perfectly. Bella is surrounded by dust clouds and Boris is sparkling clean. MG



While Boris and Bella find love at Halloween, the holiday most associated with romance occurs in February. Nancy Elizabeth Wallace crafts a beautifully illustrated tale about Valentine's Day with her picture book, The Valentine Express (Marshall Cavendish). The story is about a pair of brother and sister bunnies named Minna and Pip who deliver holiday greetings to their neighbors. After learning the origins of Valentine's Day, Minna and Pip create and exchange valentines in their classroom. On their way home, they discover that their neighbor, Mrs. Wunder, has not received any valentines. Minna and Pip decide to become the Valentine Express by making and distributing valentines to Mrs. Wunder and the rest of their neighbors. After their well-received deliveries, the bunnies return home to a surprise Valentine's cake and



decorations made for them by their parents. The three-dimensional, cut-paper illustrations are the perfect accent to this cut-paper-holiday! Teachers will find this book useful for the classroom because it features a short history lesson on the origins of Valentine’s Day and generates ideas for projects such as valentine trees or mobiles. TS

Mary Engelbreit’s picture book, Queen of Hearts (HarperCollins), is a charming Valentine’s Day story about a girl named Ann Estelle. Ann Estelle loved Valentine’s Day for many reasons, “but the thing Ann Estelle liked most of all about Valentine’s Day was making things.” When Ann Estelle started to decorate her valentine box with the words *the Queen of Hearts*, she was only beginning her project. She spent the entire week decorating the box with anything and everything she could find: glitter, feathers, lace, and even toy cars that allowed it to roll! Unfortunately, she was so preoccupied with the box that she forgot to make the most important thing: valentines. When faced with this problem, Ann Estelle had a brilliant idea. She took off all of the decorations that adorned the box and gave them away as valentines to each of her classmates. Engelbreit’s decorative borders and simple illustrations translate well into the picture book format. Both children and adults will appreciate this sweet story. TS



While Valentine’s Day is the most commonly celebrated holiday in February, Minnesota author/illustrator, Nancy Carlson, puts her spin on one of the newest holidays in the academic year in Henry’s 100 Days of Kindergarten (Viking). Henry’s teacher announces that she will be putting a jelly bean in a jar for each day of the school year. The book takes a chronological approach to the school year, showing and telling all the important events during the first few months of school such as Halloween parades and holiday concerts. In February, when the 100<sup>th</sup> day arrives, readers will see how one classroom celebrates. Carlson’s illustrations include a cast of familiar characters her picture book fans will recognize. MG

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