

BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's/Young Adult Books

Minnesota State University, Mankato

May 2005

Summer's varied activities include attending baseball games, mowing the lawn, relaxing at the beach, taking a road trip, going to camp, and of course, reading lots of books such as the ones reviewed in this issue of Book Notes.

Gabi Swiatkowski's unusual illustrations interpret Nina Payne's poem, Summertime Waltz (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). The words and pictures recall the end of a warm day. While adults linger at the table after dinner, the



children head outside to play games and chase a ball. The poem floats from a child's consciousness, combining fantasy with reality.

For example, next to the empty plates on the dinner table, a mouse investigates a pear, and a stork emerges from an overturned pot.

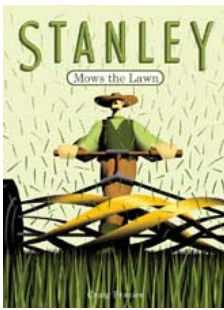
Some of the moths and mosquitoes "biting the lampposts" have human features. The surreal interpretation might confuse some readers but reinforces the strange nature of the twilight world where everything is in transition. "Lovely the lateness in summertime dark." KP

One whimsical nighttime activity is catching fireflies. Firefly Friend by Kimberly Wagner Klier and illustrated by Michael Garland is an amusing easy reader about the insects(Children's Press). The simple rhyming text tells the story of a firefly's flight during a summer night while the colorful illustrations show the story of the girl who chases the firefly. The book evokes the carefree feeling of summer when chasing fireflies, butterflies, or for the more daring, bees, are natural pastimes. TS

For a nonfiction approach, children should read Fireflies by Ann Heinrichs from Compass Point. The book, which is part of the Nature's Friends series, is filled with interesting information and colorful photographs. Readers will learn the mythology of

the firefly: “A Japanese myth says they are the tears of the Moon Princess.” Heinrichs explains why and how these fantastic insects light up, discusses where they live, and traces their growth stages. Fireflies also contains a glossary, fun facts, and a list of related websites and books. For further reading, Heinrichs explores a large variety of interesting creatures in other books such as Ants, Bats and Spiders. TS

While many children run through the lawn to catch insects, others take on mowing the lawn as a summer job. In Craig Frazier’s second Stanley picture book, Stanley Mows the Lawn (Chronicle), the vibrant illustrations capture a



shade of green that can be seen in Minnesota only during the summertime. Stanley, who looks like scarecrow because of his simply drawn facial features and cowboy hat, sets out to mow the lawn. After Stanley encounters a snake in the grass, he decides to take a new approach to mowing the lawn by sculpting it into a beautifully patterned landscape that resembles waves of snakes. Frazier’s book

encourages readers of all ages to look at the simple tasks of life in a way that is as fresh as a newly-mowed lawn. TS

The picture book Hats by Kevin Luthardt (Albert Whitman) features children hanging out in a park. The story, told mainly through its heart-warming illustrations, starts at a hat store where a group of children purchase hats that accent their different personalities. One boy buys a red and blue checkered hat and wears it to the park. A bully wearing a baseball hat with a



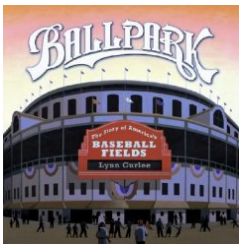
lightning and thunder cloud design mocks the boy and says, “Dumb hat.” When more kids wearing hats come to the park, the bully’s behavior is stopped by the acceptance and kindness shown by the other children. TS

Among the summertime events at parks are formal and informal baseball games. John Stadler’s humorous interpretation of the classic Take Me Out to the Ball Game uses intricate pop-ups to enliven the presentation (Simon & Schuster). All the players on the

field and spectators in Howler Stadium are animals. Signs warn the crowd not to chew on the walls. Celebrity endorsements on the back cover include testimonials from Beary Bonds and Derek Cheetah. Although the tabs and other paper engineering features won't hold up through many circulations, the book could serve as a resource for library or classroom story times or as a gift for an older baseball fan. Stadler includes the little-known words of the stanzas of the song, for which most of us know only the famous chorus. KP

Maryann Kovalski has reworked her 1992 version of the familiar words for a new picture book from Fitzhenry & Whiteside. Take Me Out to the Ball Game features irrepressible Grandma, who persuades Jenny and Joanna's parents and principal that the girls need to skip school to attend an important event. When the trio arrives at the stadium, they encounter an enthusiastic singing crowd. Kovalski draws on her memories of a 1962 Yankees World Series game for which her father took her out of school in this affectionate look at the national pastime. KP

Lynn Curlee begins his exploration of baseball history, Ballpark, with Jack Norwoth's lyrics (Atheneum). Curlee incorporates discussion of famous stadiums into an overview of the game as played through the years in the United States. He includes information about legendary players such as Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, and Jackie Robinson and places the sport in a larger social context. During the Great Depression and World War II, the game offered diversion and boosted morale. Curlee's paintings invest the game and its venues with the same grandeur he achieved in works such as Capital and Rushmore. Although he notes innovations such as lighting and Astroturf, he clearly admires "classic" parks such as Wrigley and Fenway and applauds recent moves from super-stadiums to ballparks like Camden Yards. Earlier controversies such as the Black Sox scandal are included, but the history stops before the recent steroid investigation. KP



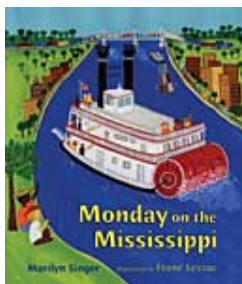
Another Athenuem title celebrates the life of Roberto Clemente: Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Jonah Winter's text reveals the obstacles and opposition Clemente faced as one of the first Latino players in the game. Raul Colon's illustrations alternate between black-and-white pencil drawings and watercolor paintings. All of them capture the motion and energy that marked Clemente's play. The book also points out his humanitarian achievements and generosity. KP

Some baseball books embroider facts to make a more compelling story. In Mudball, Matt Tavares recounts the tale of the shortest home run on record, an event which occurred on an exceedingly rainy Minnesota afternoon in 1903 (Candlewick). The St. Paul Saints held a three-run lead over the Minneapolis Millers as Little Andy Oyler, the shortest player in the league, came to bat. Although



the bases were loaded, the Millers' fans had little hope that Oyler could come up with a hit. With the infield turning into a sea of mud, the umpires decided to let the game continue in what would surely be the final out. None of the fielders saw where Oyler's bloop hit landed, and by the time they retrieved the ball, he had circled the bases and led the team to victory. Tavares' text dramatizes the frantic searches of the fielders and the scrappy base running of the Millers. The gray and brown tones of the illustrations capture the relentless rain and the resulting mud that helped Oyler achieve the only home run of his career. KP

The ball park in Marilyn Singer's Monday on the Missississippi is located in St. Louis, about halfway through her series of poetic vignettes about various locations along

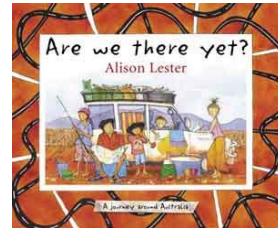


the fabled river (Henry Holt). Starting at the headwaters of Lake Itasca, Minnesota, she traces the route of the widening river with stops in places such as Hannibal, Missouri, and Memphis, Tennessee, before the Big Muddy flows through the river delta in Louisiana. Following the series of poems, a two-page account of the river's history and importance rounds out the book. Frane

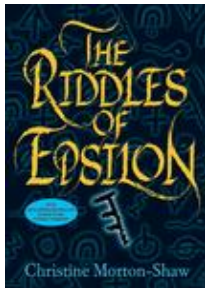
Lessac visited many locations along the river before bringing them to life in her folk-art

paintings. Each double-page spread includes an inset map that shows where the traveler is along the river's course. KP

While Singer and Lessac follow the course of the Mississippi, Alison Lester introduces young readers to Australia in her picture book, Are We There Yet? (Kane/Miller). Gracie, who just turned eight years old, gives a kid's eye view of the trip her family takes around Australia in lieu of her winter term at school. While traveling to each new place, Gracie's younger brother, Billy, asks the familiar question, "Are we there yet?" On the trip, Gracie sees boab trees and egrets, eats witchetty grubs and barramundi, and takes a bungee ride while exploring the various landmarks and landscapes of Australia. All of Gracie's travels are documented with clever illustrations that show the animals, landmarks, family members, and even hand-drawn maps of Australia and the family's old camper trailer. This picture book introduces kids to Australia, travel logs, and to a brilliant narrator. TS



While Are We There Yet? explores Australia, The Riddles of Epsilon by Christine Morton-Shaw is set on a tiny British Island called Lumi (HarperCollins). This story, written for teens, takes the reader on a strange and creepy journey full of clues, riddles, and puzzles. Fourteen-year-old Jessica discovers a dilapidated cottage with strange symbols carved in the doors and an eerie presence in the front room. It is here where she gets her first introduction to the mysterious Epsilon, whoever or whatever it is. That meeting is definitely not her last. Fans of The Westing Game will appreciate the mystery, and older readers will enjoy the suspense and scariness factor. This is a great addition to the YA/Teen collection in any library, home, or school. MG



Another great teen read is the third installment of the wildly popular "Traveling Pants" series, Girls in Pants by Ann Brashares. This book offers the reader an insider's view of the four protagonists' last summer before college (Delacorte). As in books one

and two, we see them experience changes, triumphs, and realizations. This summer Bridget returns to soccer camp and reunites with her first love, while Tibby discovers a bit about love herself. Carmen is adjusting to new changes in her family, and Lena is focused on her goal of going to art school. As in the previous books, readers will be absorbed in the characters and participate in their life experiences. With the movie version of the first “Sisterhood” book due in theaters this summer, readers can be assured that this is not the last of the “Pants.” Brashares has hinted that one more novel will be forthcoming...probably in time for next summer. MG

Summer wouldn't be summer without the chance to go to camp. Melissa Morgan's delightful new series, Camp Confidential, gives readers an insider's view of camp life (Grosset & Dunlap). This series stars eleven-year-old girls who spend eight weeks at Camp Lakeview. In Book One, Natalie's Secret, readers are introduced to a wide variety of characters. Natalie is a city girl who has never been to Camp. Alex is the ultimate camper. Alyssa is a shy artist. Jenna is a prankster, and Grace is always ready with a joke. Book Two focuses on Jenna, and the third installment will be titled, Grace's Twist. Each book spans a two-week section of camp and puts the reader in the thick of the woods and the action. The humor and light tone of the books do not overshadow issues such as bullies, divorce, and eating disorders. The series is perfect for middle grade students looking for a great, quick read with characters they can get to know and situations they can recognize. MG

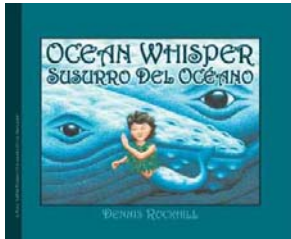


If your summer plans include a trip to a river, the ocean, a lake, or a swimming pool, you'll want to review the rules of water safety. Jean E. Pendziwol incorporates basic advice on the subject in a humorous story, A Treasure at Sea for Dragon and Me from Kids Can. Dad takes a little girl and her big green dragon friend to the beach for a picnic. While building a sand castle, they see a boat of pirates sail by and decide to follow. Unfortunately, Dragon doesn't remember or heed any safety rules and eventually needs to be rescued by the lifeguard. Yet, the story ends happily with the “pirates”

joining the picnic feast. Although the text is written in rhymed couplets, Pendziwol generally avoids a sing-song feeling. KP

After learning about water safety, consider reading To the Beach by Linda Ashman and illustrated by Nadine Bernard Westcott (Harcourt). This picture book describes a family's futile attempt to take a trip to the beach. Just when it seems like the family is on their way, someone forgets something—a ducky pail, a kite, the beach ball, or even the dog. And each time, Mom spins the car around, and the family heads home. This fun romp captures the complications and humor of everyday life through rhyming text and comic illustrations. TS

If you are not able to travel to a beach on the ocean, the picture book, Ocean Whisper: Susurro Del Oceano by Dennis Rockhill will transport you there (Raven Tree).



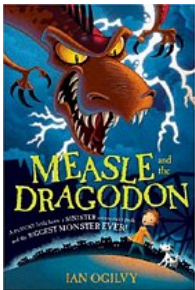
After a boy goes to sleep, the lush and imaginative illustrations show the change that takes place in his bedroom. The whale poster above the boy's bed and fish bowl at his side transform the room into an ocean landscape. This mostly wordless picture book is framed with a poem at the beginning and educator guide at the end. TS

Sometimes there are carnivals on the beach. In the chapter book, Up and at 'Em with Winnie & Ernst by Gina Freschet, (Farrar, Straus, Giroux) a possum named Winnie and an otter named Ernst head to a carnival to spend their savings. However, when they open up their piggy bank, they discover there aren't only coins in it. The carnival trip is just one of four endearing stories in this book. Winnie and Ernst also drag out a telescope, baby-sit a hen's nest of eggs, and host a poetry reading. Freschet's humorous and whimsical illustrations complement the stories. At the carnival, Winnie dunks a lobster in just one throw. Winnie and Ernst keep Mrs. H. Penny's eggs warm by sitting on a pile of pillows. More importantly, Winnie and Ernst are not just imaginative: they're best friends. TS



While Winnie and Ernst visit a carnival, another popular summer outing is a trip to an amusement park. Roxie Munro creates 12 complex mazes in her Amazement Park from Chronicle. For novices, she provides a train track that skirts the edges of the various attractions and rides. Older viewers can wend their way through mazes in such settings as the “Enchanted Castle” and “Wild West Walk.” In either option, those reaching the end of the dozen mazes can turn the book around and work their way back to the start. Each double-page spread also includes a teacher and class, a balloon man, and an ice-cream stand. For those who grow too frustrated, Munro supplies diagrams on how to solve the puzzles. Readers probably will wish this amazement park appeared in their real-life city. KP

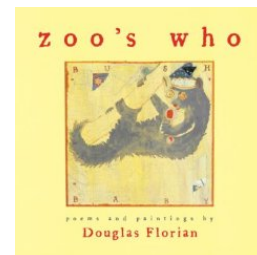
Middle grade readers looking for an exciting story where the adventure takes place at an amusement park should read Measle and the Dragodon by Ian Ogilvy from HarperCollins. Fans of Harry Potter will also enjoy this sequel to Measle and the Wrathmonk. This time, Measle is reunited with his parents Sam and Lee, only to have



his mom, Lee, get kidnapped by the insane wrathmonks. Measle must brave the once fun “Isle of Smiles” amusement park to save his mom from evil stuffed toys and carousel animals gone crazy. Set in an alternative reality much like the Potter books, wizards and humans coexist together, but there is another fantasy world involved as well.

Charming and creative, this book will definitely make you think twice about riding that last coaster at the amusement park this summer. MG

Many families visit the zoo together. Douglas Florian provides a poetic guide to some of the animals in Zoo’s Who from Harcourt. The poems are quite brief, sometimes only a couple line as in “The massive manta ray/ Always has the right of way.” Accompanying each poem is one of Florian’s signature illustrations. He works in a variety of media including “watercolor, gouache, colored pencils, inks, tin foil, candy wrappers, shredded papers, stencils, rubber stamps, and much



collage.” Although the depictions of animals could hardly be termed representative, he captures the essence of their movements in stylized ways. KP



Over Under by Marthe Jocelyn and illustrated by Tom Slaughter is another beautifully illustrated picture book that features animals (Tundra). The book is unique in that it can double as an easy reader. Slaughter’s graphic cut paper illustrations are done in bold colors. The art and text not only teach spatial concepts, for example inside and outside, but also introduce children to color, form, and design using animals such as an elephant and a mouse. TS

No matter what summer activities you have planned or where your travels lead, we hope you’ll have plenty of books close at hand. If you’re in Mankato, plan to include a visit to the CCYAB to see the latest arrivals.

REVIEWING STAFF

Kathy Piehl, Editor

Trisha Shaskan, Reviewer

Miriam Gingras, Reviewer