

BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's & Young Adult Books

Minnesota State University, Mankato

May 2006

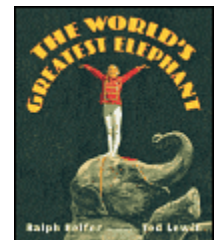
As books arrive in the CCYAB, we are sometimes struck by the serendipities of publishing. Two recent books about elephants offer an example. Leda Schubert's Ballet of the Elephants documents the efforts of John Ringling North to produce a spectacular addition to his "Greatest Show on Earth." He arranged for choreographer George Balanchine to collaborate with



composer Igor Stravinsky in creating a ballet for 50 elephants. Wearing pink tutus and jeweled headbands, the pachyderms danced with 50 human ballerinas. The 1942 circus tour included stops in 104 cities with 425 performances. Robert Andrew Parker's watercolor and ink

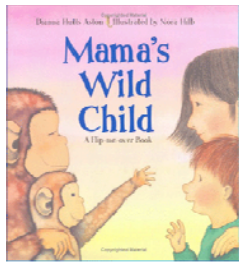
illustrations, especially on the foldout depiction of the ballet, suggest the almost dreamlike qualities of the entire spectacle. Even in a time when television and cinematic spectacles are commonplace, it is hard to imagine developing and carrying out such an enterprise. Author's notes and suggested sources provide options for those who want to learn more about various subjects introduced in this book from Roaring Brook.—KP

For a completely different view of an elephant's life in the circus, turn to The World's Greatest Elephant (Penguin). Modoc, the enormous elephant that starred in the Balanchine ballet, is the subject of this picture book by Ralph Helfer, who owned Modoc for the last 20 years of her life. In this account, Jay North is decidedly the villain, determined to acquire Modoc at any cost and to separate her from Bram, the son of an elephant trainer for the German Wundercircus. Born the same day, Bram and Modoc grew up together, performing for delighted crowds until the circus was sold to North. Determined to take Modoc to America, North arranged for the elephant to cross the ocean by ship. Bram stowed away, in what was to be the start of an incredible adventure, including days afloat at sea after the boat sank then rescue and sanctuary offered by a Maharajah of India until North arrived to reclaim his property. Time and again elephant and trainer were forcibly separated and reunited against all odds. Ted Lewin's heart-wrenching and exciting illustrations



of Bram and Modoc end with the old man curled in the elephant’s trunk, recalling photos of Modoc holding a ballerina during her years of fame.—KP

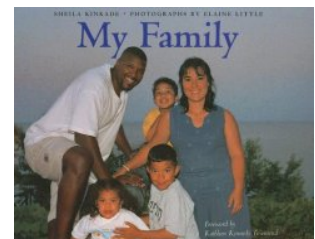
While Helfer documents the remarkable bond that can exist between human and animal, a new book by Dianne Hutts Aston emphasizes interactions between adult animals and their young. In the “flip me over” picture book, Mama’s Wild Child on one side and Papa’s Wild Child on the other, illustrated by Nora Hilb, Mama and Papa tell their son and daughter about various animals,



the “wild ones,” of the world (Charlesbridge). Hilb uses pencil and ink drawings on watercolor paper to create dreamy pictures of animals that move on the page. In Mama’s Wild Child, Mama tells her son about the different ways she would care for him “If I were your chimpanzee mama,” or “whale mama” or “llama mama.” In Papa’s Wild Child, a Papa tells his daughter how he would care for her “If I were your penguin papa” or “swan papa” or “fish

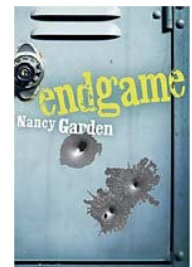
papa.” Aston’s text is rhythmic. The whale mama and calf “splish-splash with flippers and flukes on the sunny side of the ocean.” Aston’s text also includes an educational animal fact to accompany each illustration. “A stickleback father guards his babies a week after birth.” Both sides of the book combine to convey a wide range of animal facts and put a new twist on parenting while bringing home the message of parental love. Each story ends with, “I love you, my own wild child.”—TS

Sheila Kinkade stresses the importance of love in human relationships and expands the definition of “family” to the entire world in the picture book My Family (Charlesbridge). Elaine Little’s lush photographs from countries ranging from Greece to Jordan to Australia and back to the United States tell their own stories. They accompany text such as “A baby in Zambia feels loved when his mother carries him with her to the market.” Kinkade notes that “while every family is different, they are all part of the human family.” Each page of the book has photos from several different countries and talks about what families are and what families do. Families are safe and caring. Families play and eat together, teach and learn together, worship and pray together. The photos show different combinations of families, including multigenerational or single-parent families. The book ends with a map of the world.

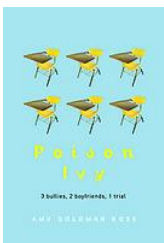


The photographs alone are worth perusing, but combined with the thoughtful text the result is a touching and needed book for families and teachers everywhere in this age of globalization.—TS

Unfortunately, not all children and young adults live in a supportive environment at home or school. Two recent novels reveal possible outcomes for those involved in stressful situations created by bullying. Nancy Garden's endgame presents the story of a fifteen-year-old school shooter from the perspective of the young man and his attorney (Harcourt). Most shooters have histories of having been bullied, and as Grayson Wilton tells his story, readers will understand how bullying escalates until those bullied step outside themselves to exact revenge on their abusers. While not sanctioning the behavior, Garden shows how students subjected to bullying can sometimes snap and commit the unforgivable and preventable crime of murder. Balancing this view are the crimes of bullies who populate schools and the teachers, staff, and parents who look the other way, considering their pranks "harmless." Garden's approach is excellent as she builds her case, small point by small point, until the bullied Wilton takes matters into his own ineffectual hands. This is a must-read for all high school students. Those in the school system can stop the bullying, and Garden presents compelling evidence why they should try.—MF



In the same vein, Amy Goldman Koss's Poison Ivy: 3 bullies, 2 boyfriends, 1 trial depicts a student, Ivy, who has been relentlessly bullied all through grade school and now high school by the Evil Three: Ann, Benita, and Sophie. As circumstances unfold, the students are all enrolled in



a government class where the teacher, Ms. Gold, chooses Ivy as the plaintiff for a mock civil trial to teach students about the workings of the justice system. Against Ivy's wishes, the teacher draws students' names for judges, a process server, and attorneys to defend Ivy and the Evil Three. However, popularity and self-preservation keep students from telling the truth. As Ivy's appointed attorney muses to herself, "On some level, we were all so accustomed to Ivy being mistreated that we didn't even recognize it as wrong" (17). The story unfolds from multiple perspectives as students share their frustrations with the trial and notice not only their own complicity in Ivy's bullying but also the bullying they endure and try to immunize themselves against. The characters are believable and the story of the trial compelling as readers get another perspective of bullying in action.—MF

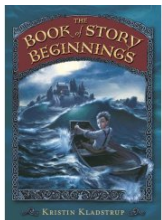
Polly Shulman's debut novel for young adults interjects humor into the high school world. Julie Lefkowitz has often been drawn into the schemes of her best friend Ashleigh, who pursues one obsession after another. However, when Ashleigh's latest Enthusiasm builds on Julie's devotion to Jane Austen, particularly Pride and Prejudice, Julie doesn't know how to react.

After Julie and Ashleigh master some old-fashioned dances and acquire suitable ball dresses, they crash a dance at an all-boys prep school. There Julie encounters Charles Grandison Parr, the Mysterious Stranger she has seen in town. Before she can get to know him, Ashleigh decides she wants him as her boyfriend. Shulman's tongue-in-cheek style incorporates language patterns and plot incidents that call

Austen's works to mind. Fans of her novels, or the movies based on them, will definitely enjoy this homage, but the novel from Penguin will please other fans of romantic comedy as well.—KP



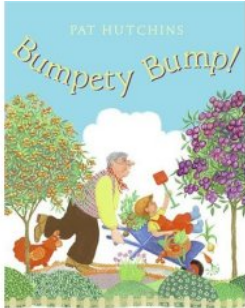
Krisin Kladstrup offers a novel in the fantasy genre in The Book of Story Beginnings (Candlewick). A cryptic message from a deceased aunt, a magical verse in a book of story beginnings, and a rowboat smelling of the ocean but located on an Iowa farm encourage young Lucy Martin to search for clues to her Uncle Oscar's disappearance as a youth in 1814. While Lucy sorts through the puzzle, her father turns into a large raven, and Uncle Oscar returns to the



attic from where Lucy's father disappeared. Having seen photographs of Uncle Oscar as a young man, Lucy recognizes him because he looks exactly as he did when he disappeared decades ago. Oscar sees that Lucy has found the book of story beginnings and cautions her that "the things you write in that book come true. They turn into stories and the stories come to life" (99). As a result of

Oscar's writing in the book of beginnings and of Lucy's finding and writing in the book, she and Oscar decide to go with their stories since they are characters of their own making. Readers will enjoy the ways multiple stories mesh and unfold as Lucy and Oscar try to find Lucy's father to change him back from his bird form. Their adventure takes them on a ship of orphans to a kingdom where the queen loves birds and the banished king has turned his subjects into cats. The unique and captivating story plot includes plenty of twists and turns.—MF

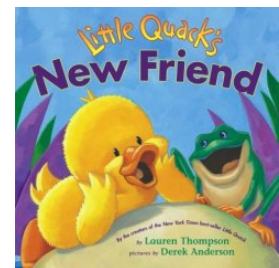
More than 30 years ago, Pat Hutchins introduced an intrepid hen whose path included twists and turns through the barnyard in Rosie's Walk. In that picture book, the hen unwittingly outmaneuvered a fox following her. Hutchins' latest book, Bumpety Bump, also features a "little



red hen," but this time she is the one that follows. She trails behind a child and Grandpa as they harvest crops from the garden (HarperCollins). The child calls to the hen to "See what I can do!" while digging potatoes and carrots then picking beans, tomatoes, and more produce. Grandpa dutifully pushes the wheelbarrow, "bumpety bump," from one part of the farm to another, including a final visit to the

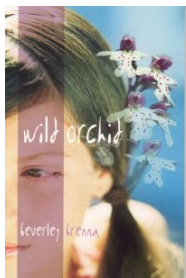
shed where the little red hen exhibits her own talent: laying an egg. Of course, no real garden would have all these vegetables and fruits ripen at the same time, but the preschool viewer will concentrate on following the interactions of hen and child and identifying familiar vegetables. The gouache illustrations with their flat perspective and bright colors help focus attention on these aspects of the simple story.—KP

Another familiar picture book character returns in Little Quack's New Friend (Simon & Schuster). The five duckling siblings, Widdle, Waddle, Piddle, Puddle, and Little Quack enjoy playing together in their pond. When Little Ribbit asks to join the fun, they hesitate. All of them provide objections to having a FROG participate—except for Little Quack, who decides to splash, squish, and bounce with the small, green newcomer. One by one the other ducklings find the fun irresistible, and soon all of them are having a great time in the water and on shore. Lauren Thompson's bouncy language that describes the playful activities will encourage the audience's verbal participation. "*Plunka, splunka, plunka, splunk!*" Minneapolis illustrator Derek Anderson once again captures the various personalities of Little Quack and his brothers and sisters through facial expressions, feather "hair-dos," and various accessories.—KP



Summer can offer plenty of opportunities for outdoor activities, but sometimes the change summer brings can be overwhelming. When Taylor Jean Simon's mom tells her they will spend the summer in Prince Albert National Park so she can be near her latest boyfriend, Taylor feels

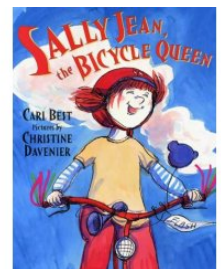
stressed that she will have to cope with so many new experiences, people, and places. Because 18-year-old Taylor has autism, where most people see a drive to a new location as one item to cope with, Taylor sees multiple items – a highway, lakes, towns – that she must incorporate into her organized and tidy world. In Wild Orchid, Beverly Brenna shares with readers the reasoning, frustrations, and patterns of organization that many autistic people require to make sense of their surroundings (Red Deer). Taylor finds a job at a nature center in the park and learns the responsibilities that go with having a job. She interacts with people who use imprecise language (slang) and puzzles over the words’ meanings. When her mother quits her job, Taylor cannot



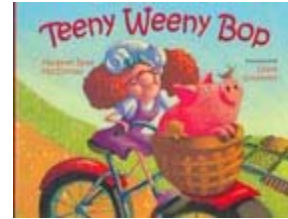
justify breaking her own work contract. In her frustration after a verbal exchange with her mother, she wanders off, gets lost in the park, and spends the night being eaten by mosquitoes. The experience teaches her that she can handle stress and confusion. Readers will marvel at the autistic thought processes that Brenna shares and appreciate the nuances of repetitive behavior autistics use. This book belongs in all school libraries for its enlightening and

entertaining glimpses of the workings of an autistic mind. Brenna has written a surprisingly touching book on people who are like us all, yet different.—MF

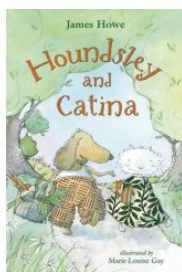
A number of books for younger readers also take place during spring and summer. One warm-weather activity that many people enjoy is bicycle riding. However, it would be hard to match the enthusiasm demonstrated by Sally Jean Sprockett in Sally Jean, the Bicycle Queen (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). Cari Best introduces young readers to Sally Jean at age one, when she rides in a bicycle seat behind her mother. When Sally Jean is four, Papa finds her a yard-sale bike, and both parents teach her how to make repairs and adjustments so that she can keep riding Flash for several years. Eventually, though, she has to face the reality that she has outgrown her trusty bike. Her family’s tight finances mean that she has to figure out ways to earn money herself. After her bike repair lessons don’t bring in enough cash for a new bicycle, she scavenges parts from junk yards to put together a bike which she dubs Lightning. Christine Davenier’s illustrations document Sally Jean’s accomplishments, especially the ingenuity and hard work that demonstrate that recycling and reusing can bring real satisfaction—KP .



Teeny Weeny Bop travels to town many ways, including by bicycle, to conduct numerous pet exchanges in Margaret Read MacDonald’s variation on a familiar theme of trying to find the perfect purchase (Albert Whitman). After finding a gold coin, Teeny Weeny Bop heads “To market, to market! To buy a fat PIG!” Unfortunately, the pig digs up the garden, which means Teeny trades for a cat. Once the feline destroys the living room, Teeny trades again. You get the idea. By the time she realizes that even a slug can cause problems, the store owner refuses to return her gold coin. MacDonald’s note explains the origin of the “foolish bargain” motif, which will interest adults who read the story. Their young listeners will be more attentive to Diane Greenesid’s zany illustrations that emphasize the humor involved in Teeny Weeny Bop’s interactions with her succession of pets.—KP



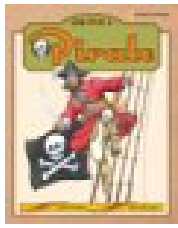
One of the best ways to spend a summer day is sharing the time with friends. James Howe introduces a pair of very good friends in Houndsley and Catina (Candlewick). This easy reader is reminiscent of chapter books about other famous duos such as Frog and Toad and George and Martha. The incidents are low-key but insightful. When Catina struggles to write a book, Houndsley faces the dilemma of how to respond to the awful chapters she has produced. When Houndsley fails miserably at a cooking contest by forgetting a recipe he had made dozens of



times with success, Catina cheers him. In the third chapter, conversations during a summer evening of watching fireflies help them realize the value of their friendship and of simple talents that can bring lasting rewards. Marie-Louise Gay’s watercolor and collage illustrations of the animal characters underscore the nuanced friendship that exists between the cat and dog.—KP

Someone who craves more adventure in their time with friends might consider the life of a pirate. Those who want to embark on this journey might consult the nonfiction picture book, How to Be a Pirate by John Malam and illustrated by Mark Bergin as an instruction manual (National Geographic). Malam writes, “Pirates Needed: Do you want to go to faraway, interesting places, meet new people, eat their food, learn their language...and get rich?” Bergin’s colorful and realistic illustrations show the details of what’s involved in climbing the rigging, tying a “Carrick bend knot,” or preparing “Salamagundi.” (That’s stew for all of you

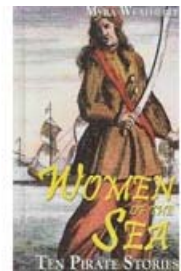
non-pirates!) This book contains an abundance of interesting facts, and these details set it apart. For example, Bartholomew Roberts' Jolly Roger bears the initials of the men he seeks revenge



upon. Before boarding the ship, the crew members sign the “ship’s articles” or rules and swear by the Bible. If you lose a limb in battle, you’ll be given extra booty to compensate. The book is rich with jewels of information that will set the sails of any young reader’s imagination soaring with delight! —TS

Women of the Sea: Ten Pirate Stories by Myra Weatherly chronicles the adventures of some of the fiercest women pirates in history (Morgan Reynolds)! The stories, filled with danger and brutality, are accompanied by colorful illustrations of historic maps, paintings, and timelines.

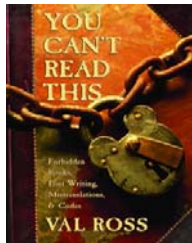
Weatherly traces the lives of women pirates from Alfhild the Viking through Lai Choi San, a Chinese pirate of the twentieth century, even though the “golden age of pirates” occurred between 1692 and 1725. The only two women pirates known from the golden age were Anne Bonny and Mary Read who both dressed as men and met aboard a pirate ship, only to discover their shared hidden identity. These two women escaped the gallows because they



were both pregnant, and it was against British law to kill an unborn child. Women such as Bonny and Read fought with swords, carried pistols, pillaged cities, and captured merchant ships on and off the coasts of the Spanish Main, Nassau, Ireland, America and China. The Chinese pirate, Chen I Sao, ruled over a fleet of 2,000 junks and 70,000 men and women “with an iron fist.” She took over the reign of her late husband, Chen I, by wearing a robe with the colors of the fleets with her husband’s swords tucked into her sides and his helmet on her head. Her crews ate rats and caterpillars. The book’s fascinating stories that span continents and history.—TS

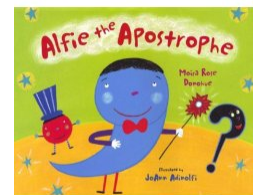
Val Ross tackles another intriguing topic in You Can’t Read This: Forbidden Books, Lost Writings, Mistranslations & Codes (Tundra). She shares the history of human attempts at communication from drawing on cave walls to designing alphabets. “The ancient idea that writing contains power, and that reading unlocks that power” is a common thread in many stories. Readers follow the history of the written word through multiple tales and historic facts. For example, the Japanese had a printing press before Gutenberg. In 764 AD, “a Japanese empress launches the biggest publishing operation the world has seen so far” by producing

hundreds of the printed prayer strips although they were never intended to be read by any human. Ross documents how throughout history the rich and powerful became keepers of the written word. Peasants were considered incapable of handling information that priests, merchants, and royal personages guarded. However, mass printing put words into the hands of the general population, empowering them with information. Ross tells of women who wrote as men, women who were not taught to read (but learned anyway), and women for whom books were forbidden

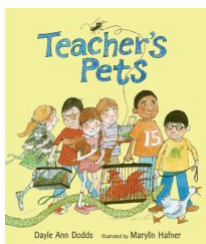


by the Taliban. At various times in history Shakespeare's plays and comic books were also suspected of leading people astray. Although no one thought such popular writings would survive, history has demonstrated their enduring qualities. Censorship has often worked in reverse, and banished books survived because they *were* banished. Ross peppers her history with true stories and tales to enliven what might have been a dry subject.—MF

Maira Rose Donohue breathes interest into a subject that many might consider boring: punctuation. In Alfie the Apostrophe, the participants in a school talent show are punctuation marks (Albert Whitman). Alfie broods about his inability to come up with a flashy act for the annual performance. Encouraged by his parents, he works on a magic routine that involves making letters disappear to form contractions. On the day of the show, the question marks pose numerous riddles, and the exclamation points lead the crowds in cheers. Alfie is almost overlooked when the emcee assumes he is a comma. However, his finale of demonstrating the possessive astounds everyone. JoAnn Adinolfi's cartoon illustrations breathe more life into punctuation marks than even ardent grammar fanatics might imagine possible. This book could serve as a welcome break from language arts practice sessions.—KP



As the school year draws to an end, Miss Fry needs to figure out what to do with The Teacher's Pets in Dayle Ann Dodd's picture book (Candlewick). These pets are the animal, not human variety. Throughout the school year, Miss Fry's classroom accumulates one pet after another. It seems that many of the pets brought for "one day" of sharing end up staying for weeks or months. First the neighbors ask Winston if his rooster can visit for a while longer. Then Vincent's mother



requests that the tarantula that likes hiding in her slippers be allowed to extend his stay. By the end of the school year, the room has become a menagerie. At the class party on the final day, Miss Fry insists that all the animals leave. As she faces the quiet room, she feels a bit lonely until she realizes that Roger has left his cricket for her, the perfect pet for her garden. Marilyn Hafner's ink, watercolor, and colored pencil illustrations carry viewers through the school year, from the autumn leaves to mid-winter Parents' Night to the final picnic. Classes with animals of their own will enjoy this visit to Miss Fry's room.—KP

Books reviewed in this issue:

Schubert, Leda. Ballet of the Elephants. Illus. by Robert Andrew Parker. Roaring Brook, 2006. ISBN 1-59643-075-3. \$17.95.

Helfer, Ralph. The World's Greatest Elephant. Illus. by Ted Lewin. Penguin, 2006. ISBN 0-399-24190-6. \$16.99.

Aston, Dianna Hutts. Mama's Wild Child / Papa's Wild Child. Illus. by Nora Hilb. Charlesbridge, 2006. ISBN 1-58089-590-3. \$14.95.

Kinkade, Sheila. My Family. Photographs by Elaine Little. Charlesbridge, 2006. ISBN 1-57091-662-4. \$16.95.

Garden, Nancy. Endgame. Harcourt, 2006. ISBN 0-15-205416-2. \$17.

Koss, Amy Goldman. Poison Ivy: 3 bullies, 2 boyfriends, 1 trial. Roaring Brook, 2006. ISBN 1-59643-118-0. \$16.95.

Shulman, Polly. Enthusiasm. Penguin, 2006. ISBN 0-399-24389-5. \$15.99.

Kladstrup, Kristin. The Book of Story Beginnings. Candlewick Press, 2006. ISBN 076362609-0. \$15.99.

Hutchins, Pat. Bumpety Bump. HarperCollins, 2006. ISBN 0-06-056000-2. \$16.89.

Thompson, Lauren. Little Quack's New Friend. Illus. by Derek Anderson. Simon & Schuster, 2006. ISBN 0-689-86893-6. \$14.95.

Brenna, Beverly. Wild Orchid. Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2005. ISBN 0-88995-330-9. \$7.95.

Best, Cari. Sally Jean the Bicycle Queen. Illus. by Christine Davenier. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006. ISBN 0-374-36386-2. \$16.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. Teeny Weeny Bop. Illus. by Diane Greenheid. Albert Whitman, 2006. ISBN 0-8075-7992-0. \$16.95.

Howe, James. Houndsley and Catina. Illus. by Marie-Louise Gay. Candlewick Press, 2006. ISBN 076362404-7. \$14.99.

Malam, John. How to be a Pirate. Illus. by Mark Bergin. National Geographic, 2005. ISBN 0-7922-7448-2. \$14.95.

Weatherly, Myra. Women of the Sea: Ten Pirate Stories. Morgan Reynolds, 2006. ISBN 1-931798-80-X. \$26.95.

Ross, Val. You Can't Read This: Forbidden Books, Lost Writing, Mistranslations & Codes. Tundra, 2006. ISBN 0-88776-732-X. \$26.99.

Donohue, Moira Rose. Alfie the Apostrophe. Illus. by JoAnn Adinolfi. Albert Whitman, 2006. ISBN 0-8075-0255-3. \$16.95.

Dodds, Dayle Ann. Teacher's Pets. Illus. by Marilyn Hafner. Candlewick Press, 2006. ISBN 076362252-4. \$15.99.

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