

BOOK NOTES

Center for Children's & Young Adult Books

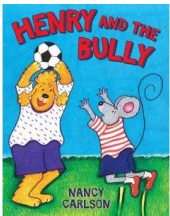
Minnesota State University, Mankato

October 2010

As we head into the new academic year, we look forward to sharing reviews of some of the dozens of new titles that have arrived in the Center for Children's and Young Adult books recently. Although we didn't set out to develop specific themes, several of the books address the growing concern about bullying. Others look at real and fictional triumphs characters have as they grow and mature. However, there is also room for fun at a state fair or in a classroom overrun by furry pets. If you have a chance to stop by the CCYAB, come visit to browse through the great new titles that are arriving this fall.

Picture Books

Nancy Carlson's latest look at elementary school life focuses on *Henry and the Bully* (Viking). Henry and his first-grade friends have fun playing soccer at recess until they encounter Sam, a new second grader who kicks the ball over the fence. Henry's protests are ineffective because Sam is so much larger. Henry's teacher promises to help, but his other duties often keep him away from intervening in the escalating harassment by Sam and other second graders. Soon Henry is so miserable that he starts doing poorly in class and doesn't want to go to school. Then on a shopping trip with his mom, Henry sees Sam decked out in an extravagant dress for her uncle's wedding. Yes, Samantha is a girl. When she threatens to make Henry miserable if he tells anyone about her awful outfit, he responds kindly. "Sam was so surprised she didn't know what to say." On the playground, she and Henry lead their grades into a game of soccer they play together. Carlson's assorted animal characters will be familiar to anyone who has read her books before. Although the solution she offers to bullying may seem a bit idealistic, she does stress the importance of asking for adult help in dealing with the problem of bullies. Reading the picture book with small groups or an entire class could result in helpful discussions.—KP

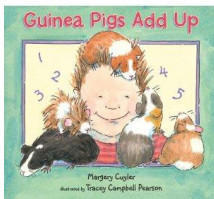


Laurel Croza's poignant text captures the bittersweet feelings involved in a move in *I Know Here* (Groundwood). The young girl who narrates the story has just learned that her family will be moving to Toronto from Saskatchewan, where her father's work crew has completed building a dam. She tries to imagine the towering buildings of the city as she looks around at the place she now lives. She knows the roads and trailers and the feel of pine needles under her feet. She knows the howls of wolves and the "squishy spot by the beaver dam" where her sister catches frogs. As her teacher moves her finger across the map of Canada to trace the route from prairies to city, the girl wonders if the people in Toronto have seen all that she has. She



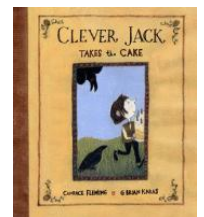
decides to make a drawing that will remind her of what she knows. That way she can fold the drawing, put it in her pocket and “take my road with me.” Matt James’ acrylic and ink illustrations capture the elusive quality of elementary school artwork. The simple designs and slightly surreal perspective cross the line from reality to dream, the way that new perceptions and haunting memories combine to capture an important time and place. Croza mines her own memories of moving from one site to another in her childhood. Although James lives in Toronto, his appreciation of the remote part of his vast county is obvious in his paintings.—KP

Anyone who has had a pair of pets know the reality that Margery Cuyler explores in ***Guinea Pigs Add Up*** (Walker). The guinea pig that arrives in Mr. Gilbert’s class proves to be a favorite with all the students. However, they soon decide that he seems lonely in the

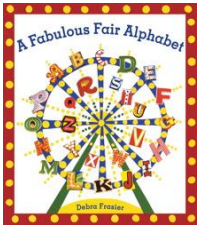


cage by himself. Unfortunately, the friend Mr. Gilbert brings for him turns out to be a she. Lessons in addition quickly become lessons in multiplication as the pets romp in their cage and on the playground. When the number reaches 20, Mr. Gilbert decides that drastic action is required. He contacts the parents to find homes for the guinea pigs. Slowly the numbers dwindle as children practice subtraction. However, the new classroom pet, Mr. Whiskers, turns out to be expecting little bunnies. Let the fun recommence! Tracey Campbell Pearson adds her usual humor to the mix with her watercolor and ink illustrations. The many colored guinea pigs take over the classroom and fill the pages to allow plenty of counting opportunities for young listeners.—KP

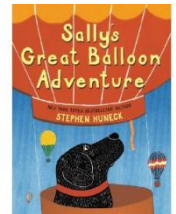
Although Jack, along with all the other children in the kingdom, receives an invitation to the princess’s tenth birthday party, his mother tells him he won’t be able to attend. They are too poor to buy a gift and own nothing fine enough to offer. Yet, Jack is determined to create a present. He industriously assembles the ingredients required for a magnificent cake and sets out for the party. Candace Fleming reveals the mishaps that ensue along the way as ***Clever Jack Takes the Cake*** to the princess (Random House). Thieving blackbirds, a hungry troll, and a gloomy forest that requires candlelight to navigate are some of the trials that shrink Jack’s fantastic cake down to a single strawberry by the time he reaches the castle. There a bored princess flings jewels and gold onto a heap. Jack’s tale of the cake’s creation and destruction intrigues her, and she laughs at the “fine gift” of a story Jack has brought. Readers and listeners will appreciate this fine gift too, including G. Brian Karas’ humorous illustrations in muted tones. From a series of small pictures on some pages to double-page spreads at dramatic moments, the illustrations chronicle the rise and fall of the sweet birthday treat.—KP



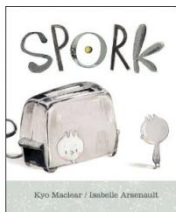
If memories of a summer visit to a county or state fair are already receding, you can revive them with a trip through Debra Frasier's *Fabulous Fair Alphabet* (Simon & Schuster). All the razzle-dazzle of the show barns, the Midway, and the exhibits fill the pages with alphabetic pulses of color. Frasier incorporates the featured letters into borders. She fashions them into signs and into the objects themselves. For example, all the seats of the ferris wheel are a variation of F, and the quilt pattern features multi-colored Qs. Food and drink figure prominently, including cotton candy, lemonade, and dill pickle (on a stick, of course). E summarizes best: Eat everything. The roller coaster rushes across a double-page spread, just part of the excitement that eventually results in a yawning child heading home. The vibrant images burst off the pages in this glorious celebration of an annual tradition. Although Frasier used the Minnesota state fair as her inspiration, the images will resonate with anyone who has attended similar events.—KP



In his latest picture book, Stephen Huneck sends his intrepid black Labrador soaring high in the sky in *Sally's Great Balloon Adventure* (Abrams). Although Sally has seen small balloons before, she doesn't know what to make of the colorful hot air balloons floating high above. One thing she does understand, though, is fried chicken. The smell of a container in a gondola draws Sally to investigate, and before anyone realizes what is happening, Sally has pulled the mooring rope and is headed for the sky. While frantic people on the ground try to figure out a way to bring her down, Sally doesn't panic because she "feels lucky to be alone with such delicious-smelling chicken." A media frenzy ensues with all sorts of wild suggestions for Sally's rescue, including sending air force planes. Fortunately, a more sensible solution comes as Sally drifts low enough to hear a girl's instructions to play tug-of-war. Pulling the rope allows Sally to return safely, with chicken dinner as a satisfying treat. Huneck's clear, woodcut prints and oversize format make the book a good choice for story time sharing. Younger readers will enjoy the return of a familiar character. Adults will appreciate the subtle humor of the media frenzy about Sally's plight while the dog calmly sleeps in the gondola.—KP

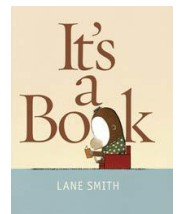


Poor *Spork* (Kids Can) doesn't know where he belongs. He is neither a spoon like his mum or a fork like his dad; he's a little bit of both. When he dons a hat and tries to look more spoonish, the forks reject him, and when he makes a crown and tries to be more forkish, the spoons reject him. He is never picked when the table is set, and at meals he sits and watches from the sidelines. That is,

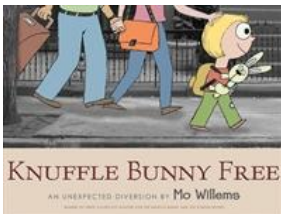


until the day the *messy thing* arrives; the *messy thing* needs something that is neither a spoon nor a fork, but a little bit of both. To help the baby who is learning how to feed itself, Spork is just right. The expressions drawn on the faces of the flatware are spot-on, with Isabelle Arsenault's illustrations capturing Spork's loneliness, his parents' beaming pride in him just the way he is, and the terror of the forks and spoons when confronted with the *messy thing*. This story will resonate with the growing number of children who are bi-racial, as is author and self-professed spork Kyo Maclear, and with all the unique children out there who have not yet found their place in the world. - JC

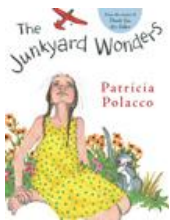
It doesn't scroll, tweet, text or blog. It doesn't require a mouse, a password, a screen name or wi-fi . ***It's a Book*** (Roaring Brook Press). Monkey and mouse introduce the simple act of reading a book to tech savvy Jackass. At first Jackass misses the point, translating a page of *Treasure Island* into the briefest of text messages, but he soon becomes engrossed in the book. Lane Smith's sparse writing is complemented with illustrations that effortlessly convey the characters' emotions through facial expressions drawn with a few strategic lines. The subversive punch line, accompanied by the shock shown on Jackass's face and through his body language, will make both children and adults laugh out loud. This book will be appreciated by everyone who prefers to read an actual book rather than a scroll through one on a computer or Kindle. - JC



Trixie and her stuffed rabbit travel great distances in ***Knuffle Bunny Free*** (HarperCollins). They set out with Trixie's parents to visit "Oma" and "Opa" in Holland. After long waits in airport security and in the gate area, they finally board the plane for the trans-Atlantic flight. In the disorientation of jet lag and the excitement of arriving at Oma and Opa's house, Knuffle Bunny is forgotten. Too late! The plane has left for China. Although Trixie does her best to cope with the situation and enjoy her visit, she is still sad. The fancy mechanical bunny doll that Oma and Opa buy doesn't really cheer her up even though it can walk, dance, and speak (Dutch). Then one night Trixie dreams of Knuffle Bunny in travels around the world and knows that she can let him go to make other children happy. The rest of the visit goes more smoothly, but the return flight brings a real surprise and a big decision for Trixie. Mo Willems explores the joy and sadness of growing up with insight and affection. His color cartoon images of people are combined with black-and-white photograph scenes to create interesting digital collage illustrations. Those who met Knuffle Bunny in previous adventures definitely will clamor for this latest chapter about the relationship of Trixie and her bunny.—KP

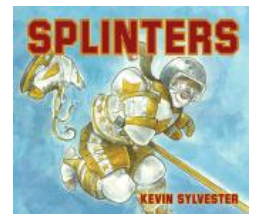


Fiction



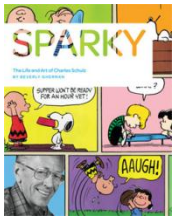
Trisha's excitement at going to a new school where no one knows that she used to be in the *special* class turns to disappointment when she is placed in "the junkyard," a class for the throwaway kids who are different. Her disappointment is short-lived after meeting her classmates and her teacher, Mrs. Peterson. Mrs. Peterson believes in her students; she tells them that they possess genius and calls them her **Junkyard Wonders** (Penguin). She divides the class into tribes, and Tricia's tribe members quickly become her best friends. One day after a bully calls Trisha and her friends "weirdos" and "retards," Mrs. Peterson brings the class to a junkyard to show them the possibilities that can be found in cast-offs. Each tribe is assigned the task of finding items that can be formed into something new and making it happen. Despite the opposition of school administration, the continued efforts of the bully and the loss of one of their members, Trisha's tribe creates something wondrous. This book shows how the faith of one dedicated teacher can make all the difference in the lives of her students. This is a true story based on the experiences of author Patricia Polacco. The postscript explains what happened to the real Junkyard Wonders and is poignant enough to make adults get a little teary. Patricia Polacco's illustrations are vibrant and colorful and artfully express the children's emotions, especially their excitement at learning and being together and the exhilaration of their triumph. – JC

Kevin Sylvester provides a new spin on the well-known Cinderella story in **Splinters** (Tundra). Cindy Winters loves to play hockey, but her parents don't have the money to buy new equipment or pay the fees to sign up to join a real league. After many fund-raising efforts, Cindy manages to raise enough for the fees but has to use her mother's old equipment. Unfortunately, Cindy is assigned to a team dominated by the Blister Sisters, who do everything they can to make Cindy look bad. Even more unfortunately, their mother is the team's coach. Relegated to the locker room to clean uniforms and tape sticks, Cindy doesn't see how she will ever have a chance to sign up for the all-star hockey team coached by Charmaine Prince. Enter the fairy goaltender. Dressed in a flashy gold-and-white uniform and skates, Cindy drives to the tryouts on a brand new Zamboni. Her play dazzles Coach Prince, but when the final buzzer sounds, Cindy's finery vanishes. All she leaves behind is one of her skates. Of course, readers will know how the story turns out, with the skate fitting Cindy perfectly. Coach Prince and her new all-star end the story knowing that they will "love hockey happily ever after." Muted colors in the watercolor and ink illustrations don't overwhelm the narration. The book will appeal to elementary school students who already know the original. If they like hockey, so much the better.—KP



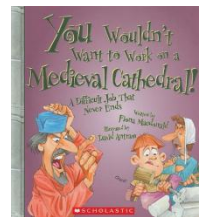
Non-Fiction

Minnesota native Charles Schulz gained worldwide recognition for the creation of the Peanuts comic strip. Beverly Gherman presents a biography for those in upper elementary grades and above in *Sparky: The Life and Art of Charles Schulz* (Chronicle). Incidents in his life clearly influenced both the characters themselves and some of the

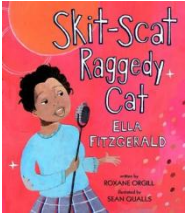


interactions they experienced in the famous cartoons. There is a lot of Charles Schulz in Charlie Brown, from the profession of their fathers (barber) to the unrequited love for a little red-haired girl. Readers follow Schulz's development as an artist through his school days, experiences in the Second World War, and his determination to succeed in cartooning after his discharge. Gherman includes information about Schulz's marriages and children, his preference for routine, and his drive to keep producing his famous comic strip despite serious illness. He died the night before the final episode appeared in newspapers around the world. The book's design is intriguing. Family photographs and episodes of Peanuts cartoons relate neatly to the text and enhance Gherman's account. What is especially surprising is that the background colors of the pages change throughout the book, necessitating change of type color as well. This approach adds plenty of visual interest, appropriate for an artist's life, although it may make reading a bit challenging for some who need effective contrast to decipher words. —KP

To even be considered for the job, you must spend seven years as an unpaid apprentice followed by ten years as a journeyman. It's dusty, dangerous, exhausting and complicated work. You have to impress the mason guild, plead with kings and abbots, transport materials from far away, and cope with demanding pilgrims. After all that, you will spend your entire life building a church which you will never live long enough see completed. ***You Wouldn't Want to Work on a Medieval Cathedral!*** (Scholastic). This book is part of the *You Wouldn't Want to Be...* non-fiction series published by Scholastic. Author Fiona Macdonald takes a conversational approach to history, writing in the voice of a stone mason speaking to the grandson who wants to follow in his footsteps. Because of this approach, you really get the feel for what it was like to be one of the individuals who worked on the magnificent structures that we can still enjoy today. As with all the *You Wouldn't Want to Be...* books, the harsher side of life in past times is highlighted. David Antram's amusing illustrations make this history fun and will appeal to the upper elementary target age group. Side notes accompany the narrative, providing additional historical information, clarifying concepts and explaining architectural terms. This book would be a great supplement to a unit on medieval Europe; it's funny, accessible and very informative. - JC

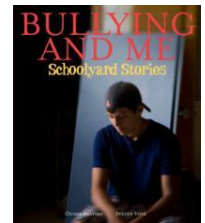


Skit-Scat Raggedy Cat: Ella Fitzgerald (Candlewick) tells the true story of Ella Fitzgerald's rise from raggedy cat to stardom. Ella was never a pretty girl, but she loved to dance and she loved to sing. After her mother died, Ella was sent to a school for orphans.



Poorly treated there, she ran away to Harlem and lived hand-to-mouth, sleeping on friends' couches and wearing whatever she could find to keep warm. Ugly, dirty, with old clothes and messy hair, Ella still could sing. Her singing won first place at Amateur Night at the Apollo and at the Harlem Opera House. Because she had a voice that made people dance, she was asked to join the famous Chick Webb's band as lead singer. At twenty-one, Ella recorded "A Tisket, A Tasket," which became a number one hit and propelled her to fame. Roxane Orgill's writing, filled with lyrical jazz terms and phrases, is meant to be read out loud, but may be a bit too long for many picture-book aged children. Evocative of the 1930s era, illustrator Sean Qualls' dynamic band room scenes allow you to almost hear the music, see the movement and feel the excitement. - JC

Ouisie Shapiro interviewed children, adolescents, and adults for the collection of real-life experiences she presents in ***Bullying and Me: Schoolyard Stories*** (Albert Whitman). After each brief account of the bullying situation, the effects on the people involved, and how the situation was handled, Dorothy Espelage, a professor of educational psychology, offers brief comments and suggestions about dealing with similar problems. Steven Vote's photographs that accompany the accounts reinforce the idea that bullies can target both boys and girls of all races and ages. Shapiro also includes stories by someone who participated in bullying a classmate and another who didn't intervene when his friend was the target. Because the majority of examples deal with incidents in middle school and junior high, the book would be an especially effective choice for libraries serving those students. The volume concludes with a set of tips for dealing with bullies.—KP



Book Reviews written by:

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Books Reviewed in this issue:

Carlson, Nancy. *Henry and the Bully*. Abrams, 2010. ISBN 9780670011483. \$15.99.

Croza, Laurel. *I Know Here*. Groundwood Books, 2010. ISBN 9780888999238. \$18.95.

Cuyler, Margery. *Guinea Pigs Add Up*. Walker & Co., 2010. ISBN 9780802797957. \$16.99.

Fleming, Candace. *Clever Jack Takes the Cake*. Random House, 2010. ISBN 9780375849794. \$17.99.

Frasier, Debra. *A Fabulous Fair Alphabet*. Simon & Schuster, 2010. ISBN 9781416998174. \$16.99.

Gherman, Beverly. *Sparky: The Life and Times of Charles Schulz*. Chronicle Books. ISBN 9780811867900. \$16.99.

Huneck, Stephen. *Sally's Great Balloon Adventure*. Abrams, 2010. ISBN 9780810983311. \$16.95.

Macdonald, Fiona. *You Wouldn't Want to Work on a Medieval Castle*. Scholastic, 2010. ISBN 9780531205044.

Maclear, Kyo. *Spork*. Kids Can Press, 2010. ISBN 9781553377368. \$16.95.

Orgill, Roxane. *Skit-Scat, Raggedy Cat: Ella Fitzgerald*. Candlewick Press, 2010. ISBN 9780763617332. \$17.99.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Junkyard Wonders*. Penguin, 2010. ISBN 9780399250781. \$17.99.

Shapiro, Ouisie. *Bullying and Me: Schoolyard Stories*. Albert Whitman, 2010. ISBN 9780807509210. \$16.99.

Smith, Lane. *It's a Book*. Roaring Brook Press, 2010. ISBN 9781596436060. \$12.99

Sylvester, Kevin. *Splinters*. Tundra Books, 2010. ISBN 9780887769443. \$17.95.

Willems, Mo. HarperCollins, 2010. ISBN 9780061929571. \$17.99.