

Book Banter

November 2007

Non-Fiction Elementary

Readers learn lots about fourteen geographical areas of New York State in Margery Facklam and Peggy Thomas's *New York: The Empire State* (Charlesbridge, '07). Manhattan is shown, in a double-page spread, as it might have appeared when the first settlers arrived; then in another double-page display (drawn by gifted illustrator Jon Messer), as it is today. The Catskills, the Capital District, and the Adirondacks are among the other areas featured. In each double-page section there are four or five windows that highlight the important historical events or explain the unique qualities of that part of the State. There is a list of resources and links to make further research easy. This very affordable (\$6.95) picture book is appropriate from age nine on to High School. Adults too will find this book informative, and the well-planned double-page spreads arresting, and engrossing.

Did you know that there are more than 7,500 varieties of apples grown around the world? Or that American colonists called the apple a "winter banana"? All this information (and much more) about the apple (first cultivated, historians believe,



in Asia around 6500 BCE) is in Jacqueline Farmer's *Apples* (Charlesbridge, '07). The title is clear and simple; the content is mesmerizing—chock full of little known and fascinating facts. This book is an excellent resource for Elementary-aged children.....if their parents don't

get their hands on it first!

Arctic Thaw: The people of the Whale in a Changing Climate (Boyd's Mills Press, '07) is by photographer/author Peter Lourie. The Inupiaq are an Eskimo people who live in northwestern Alaska. They are fishermen who hunt the bowhead whale and store the meat in the ice so it can be used throughout the year. Because of global warming the

ice where they fish has become dangerously thin, so fishing has become more difficult. And the ice where they store their food also is no longer adequate for season-long preservation.

The people of Barrow (which is in fact the northern-most city in the United States) become real through Lourie's photographs. It is easy to understand how global

warming is beginning to affect the Inupiaq's way of life, and force changes in their culture. Lourie's text also introduces the reader to scientists who have



traveled to Barrow to measure temperature changes and engage in experiments relating to global climate change. If steps are not taken soon that reverse the thinning Alaskan ice, the future for these (and other) Northern people is dismal, and the implications for the rest of the world, profound. Lourie's book centers on a very current theme. His photographs are riveting; his text is often disconcerting but affecting, and thought provoking.

Early Elementary children will find *Shelly* (Dutton, '06), by Margie Palatine, entrancing. Shelly is a youngster who isn't ready yet to come out of his shell. His three sisters are impatient for him to become more lively, to become more like a boy! One wonders if they won't change their minds once his shell disappears. Will they wish for the quiet introvert he once was? This book is a likable portrait of the age. Young readers will find the "psychology" of the two genders true to life; they'll also find much to identify with, and much to think about.

Intermediate & Young Adult

Gilbert is back!—and celebrating the end of the school year in Diane de Groat's book *No More Pencils, No More Books, No More Teacher's Dirty Looks* (Harper Collins, 2006). Gilbert's teacher, Mrs. Byrd, has organized a "Last Day of School" party, and will be giving out awards. Everyone's parents will be coming. Gilbert is concerned because he doesn't think he is "best" at anything, so what award could he possibly win? Although he's nervous himself, he steps in to help a friend who gets stage fright during the presentation, and helps his friend cope. This gesture shows what makes

Gilbert special, and he receives a certificate from the teacher in recognition of his generous act. The value that adults attach to those who help others is a clear lesson, tenderly disclosed. This would be a wonderful book to share with your Elementary classes as June approaches!

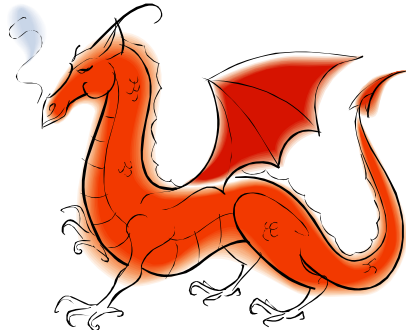
Enthusiasm (Putnam, '06) by Polly Shulman is captivating, right to its last pages. Ashley and Julie are two High School friends who do everything together. Ashley gets deeply involved in 'crazes' of any kind, and usually drags Julie in. After reading J. Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* Ashley emulates the heroine in her behavior, and also in period dress. Especially female High -Schoolers will really become absorbed into this one.

Have you ever heard of a tridrake? If you're a fan of fantasy books, you probably know that it means a three-headed dragon. In ***The Return of the Dragon*** by Rebecca Rupp (Candlewick Press, '05), a sequel to *The Dragon on Lonely Island*, readers encounter the friendly

tridrake, Fafnyr Goldenwings. Zachary, Hannah and Sarah Emily live on an island, in a small community.

They're entrusted by their Aunt

Mehitable to keep the secret of Fafnyr's existence from strangers. Because they're friends of the dragon they try to hide Fafnyr's cave from a mysterious millionaire who appears on their island and begins to snoop around. Through the course of the novel the dragon tells the children stories from different points in time that he (or she!) has lived through, to teach them lessons. Aesop was never like this! But the idea of having life's lessons learned through a dragon is an interesting modern twist; and the author makes the process appealing, magical, and fun.



Specials (Simon Pulse, '06) is the third in a series of novels (the first two were *Uglies*, and *Pretties*) by Scott Westerfeld. The novels are all set in a future age, after some human-made bacteria have destroyed the modern world. In the earlier novels

Tally, the sixteen-year-old protagonist, not conforming to an institutionalized standard of beauty, is classified as an "Ugly." She yearns to become a "Pretty"; but to do so, the heinous Department of Special Circumstances requires her to infiltrate a breakaway settlement of rebel "Uglies" called "The Smoke." In this third novel Tally has become a "Special," endowed with supercharged fighting skills and instructed to keep the "Uglies" down and the "Pretties" stupid. In the course of the novel Tally transforms into a "Cutter" (who wear masks, as they slice their way through the trees on their hoverboards!, to protect their faces and hands against the icicles that whip past). She is trying to reunite with special friend Zane, and make him too into a "Cutter." Tally finds herself in the only war ever waged against the "New Smoke" rebels, and things are beginning to get bad. She'll keep you on pins and needles as she deliberates which side she will finally join for good—the "Cutters" or the "New Smoke." A Tenth- Grader gave this book a 9.5 (out of 10) rating. That's not surprising. Many High School students will find themselves entranced by Westerfeld's vision of this dystopic future world, populated by disparate groups, each with its own powers and characteristics, with nicely drawn characters, all in the teen-aged bracket. But for all that, the plot is both believable and involving, and the action just about non-stop. There is much to like here (although readers will enjoy "*Specials*" most if they first become familiar with the earlier novels in the trilogy). There is thoughtful material in this book too, with themes relating to loyalty, honesty, justice, love—and the dangers of fascism—recurring in every episode. But the action—and the characters—are the real trump cards. "*Specials*" is spellbinding, and a page-turner.

NYSRA

Children's Literature Committee

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