

Book Banter

Summer 2007

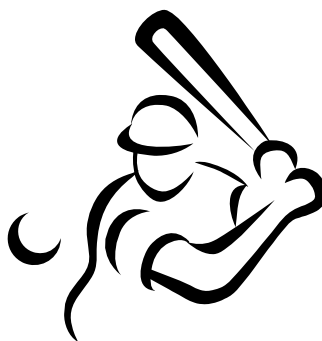
Two young boys, Abe and Willie, next-door neighbors in old-time Brooklyn, share a secret in Richard Michelson's **Across the Alley** (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006). In striking prose the author recounts the story of a sweet, hidden friendship that develops through open windows between two boys of very different heritages. When Abe's grandfather catches them, the two demonstrate great loyalty toward each other, and courage in facing the grandfather's disapproval. This is beautifully illustrated book (by E.B. Lewis) that will serve as springboard into discussions about friendships that transcend multicultural differences. The book would also be a powerful read-aloud, especially suitable for Elementary and Middle School-aged children.

The most eye-catching personal achievement in baseball is probably the home run. In **Long Ball: the Legend and Lore of the Home Run** by Mark Stewart and Mike Kennedy (Millbrook Press, 2006) readers find out the "real story" behind some of the most famous home runs ever hit, along with good solid information about the players who specialized in hitting them. This book engrossingly distinguishes fact from fiction about many of the famous sluggers. The long ball is looked at from many different angles in a prose style that will thrill those who love baseball. They'll likewise learn some pretty neat things about some of the big stars of the diamond, past and present.

Let's stay with baseball: Popular sports author Dan Gutman hits a virtual grand slam with **Satch & Me** (Harper Collins, 2006), a historical novel that incorporates a biographical profile of the incomparable Satchel Paige. The text is a baseball lover's dream. In an exciting time-travel narrative the author links his characters'

contemporary baseball experiences with the game of the past, recounting his story as if the characters were actually there, *living* the event. Main character Stosh and his coach Flip Valentini travel to 1942's Negro League World Series where Satch, thought by many to be the fastest pitcher of all time, faces the redoubtable power-hitter Josh Gibson. Our time-travelers experience Paige's fast-talking, fast-throwing style in Gutman's rousing account, and can "feel" what it must have been like to face Gibson. This book—another in a series of popular *Baseball Card Adventures* published by Harper Collins—mixes fact with fiction in an appealing and realistic way; it will be enjoyed especially by Elementary and Middle School-aged readers.

Can you stand a little more baseball? (There must be something in the warm summer air that makes authors' thoughts turn to the National Pastime!) **Jackie's Bat** (Simon & Schuster, 2006) pairs the Caldecott-artist Brian Pinkney with the award-winning author Marybeth Lorbiecki in this story about Jackie Robinson just at the beginning of his National League career. The story is told from the point of view of a fictional batboy for the



Brooklyn Dodgers, who is against having a black player on the team. As he sees the prejudice Jackie Robinson faces from the fans and his teammates his opinion begins to change. He observes that Jackie cannot stay at the

hotels or eat with the team. Jackie had promised not to make trouble and perseveres, saying nothing. Recognizing Jackie's astonishing talent on the field, Joey learns as well to respect his strength of character. Gradually, he comes to accept him as a fellow team member. This is a great story about baseball and one of its near-legendary stars; it's also the poignant account of a young boy reevaluating his own prejudices, and learning to see "beneath the cover." Young readers (and not so young) will find it enjoyable—and thought provoking.

It's a warm Southern night, so pull up a chair and listen in on some **Porch Lies: Tales of Slicksters, Tricksters and Other Wily Characters** by Patricia McKissack (Schwartz & Wade Books, 2006). You'll hear some tall tales and meet some sneaky characters. Are the characters telling the truth? Hard to say. In one story, Aunt Gran asks some kindly travelers for help. Does she know they're really famous outlaws who should not be trusted? Another story tells how Montgomery Red is able to defeat the King of Ghosts with an earth bone. Does this "bone" hold special powers to banish ghosts—or is it just a rock? "Some believe, some don't. I'll let you decide" is the advice of the storyteller. Sip some lemonade, and listen as the storyteller spins more tales!

Daniel is a very brave boy. He isn't afraid of spiders, snakes or even thunderstorms. And he's not at all afraid of dogs—certainly not! He just doesn't like them. But what is Daniel to do when his mom brings home a dog, in Susanna Pitzer's book **Not Afraid of Dogs** (Walker &



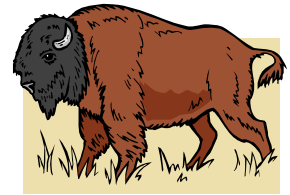
Company, 2006)? Well, this bravest boy of all locks himself in his room. However, when Bandit shows that he's scared

during a thunderstorm, Daniel learns that he may just like dogs after all. This is a sweet story that dog lovers will thoroughly enjoy, of a boy connecting with his pet

The moon was once round and danced proudly across the sky. So why is it sometimes only a sliver? **How the Moon Regained Her Shape** by Janet Ruth Heller (Sylva Dell, 2006) offers a Native American-influenced explanation for the changing shapes of the moon. The sun was mean to the moon one day, which hurt her feelings and caused her to grow smaller. The moon's friends explain how important she is and slowly rebuild her self-esteem. With confidence regained she grows to her full size and is able to return to the sky path, remembering those who love her

whenever someone comes to insult her. The illustrations are detailed and, like the text, reflect Native American culture. The story also provides an opportunity to discuss bullying, courage, the power of good friendship, and self-esteem.

The bond linking generations is the focus of Jim Aronsky's book, **Grandfather Buffalo** (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2006). Grandfather Buffalo is slow and has difficulty keeping up as the herd travels. When a female buffalo gets left behind and gives birth, however, Grandfather Buffalo is there to protect the mother and calf. He keeps them together through a dust storm and makes sure they are always within sight of the herd. Although he is



old, Grandfather Buffalo is still strong and continues to be a member of the herd. This heartwarming story is enhanced by beautiful watercolor pictures, and a clear message. It would easily lend itself to discussion among young readers, and also be a great read-aloud.

The Dragon Snatcher by M. P. Robertson, (Dial Books, 2006) is the beautifully written and illustrated tale of a boy named George and his unusual friend ...a dragon. His dragon friend begs George to help him save baby dragon eggs from a wizard who is locking them up in his castle. Can George help his friend and save the lives of future dragons? This is a warm and delightful fantasy that young readers will enjoy.

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