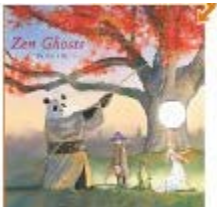


Book Banter

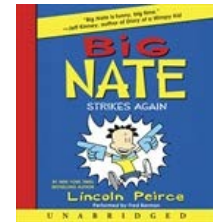
Fall 2010

Zen Ghosts (Scholastic, '10) is a spooky companion to the earlier *Zen Shorts* and *Zen Ties*, all three written and richly illustrated by Jon Muth. This story is set at Halloween, and centers on Stillwater, a huge, lovable talking panda who goes trick-or-treating with his young human buddies ...Michael, Addy and Karl. The children ask Stillwater to tell them a ghost story, so after the trick-or-treating the panda takes the children to his home and recounts a wonderful old Buddhist tale he had learned long ago, sketching the story in ink as he tells it. The story focuses on Senjo, an only child who thinks she is to marry her childhood love but instead is given in marriage by her father to an older prosperous man. Senjo runs off with her childhood sweetheart, gets married, has children, then much later returns to her original village to reunite with her father whom she still loves deeply, as he does her. It is there that Senjo meets the "other" Senjo, the one who had never left her father! The two now merge into one, and all ends well, for everyone.

The structure of the book, then, is a tale within a tale, the two expertly woven together, with Stillwater's ink sketches contrasting sharply with the vibrant watercolors of the Halloween costumes and the fall foliage displayed elsewhere in the book's main story. As in his other children's books the artwork on Muth's pages is often striking in vision, detail and poignancy. Several of his scenes are close to being frameable works of art. The author adds a post-script note explaining that this story is what Buddhist students call a *koan*—in effect a series of moral questions one has to answer for oneself. The idea is to provoke the reader to contemplate and react to the story. That said, Muth's approach is unpedantic. His "Zen" trilogy is aimed at an Elementary School audience and is appropriate to that level. *Zen Ghosts* is a fun book, especially in this Halloween season. Like his earlier—outstanding—*Three Questions*, however, the Zen books will provoke discussion among readers of all ages.



Lincoln Peirce has a superb pedigree for the graphic novel: he's not only a political cartoonist for the *New York Times* but also the author/creator of the bestseller comic strip "Big Nate," which appears daily on-line and in newspapers across the country. His latest graphic novel—geared to Elementary Schoolers (and anyone who enjoys 'comics')—is *Big Nate Strikes Again* (Harper, '10). In this second book in the series Middle School student Nate navigates through visits to the principal's office, communication issues with his parents, problems with his peers (notably geeky Gina, delectable Jenny and rough-tough Randy), and of course the usual daily tribulations of school. All these hilarious (but believable) escapades make Nate—who is definitely NOT the teacher's pet—a character to remember. An interesting aspect about this novel is that while the young reader scarcely notices, serious themes involving sportsmanship, fair play and "rightness" surface from the plotline. So, while ostensibly written to entertain, this book would readily extend itself to discussion of more meaningful social issues. Another interesting aspect is that there is substantially more reading involved in this 'graphic novel' than just the strips. Indeed, in some sections the strips serve mainly as connective tissue, to relate one incident to the next, adding visual humor to support the text. The 'hidden' reading mixed in with the strips however is painless. The print is large, the vocabulary well managed and appropriate to the elementary and intermediate reading levels, and the narrative flow is such that beyond the first few pages the reader is swept along without effort. Pierce notes at the end of the book that a sequel is already in the works. On the basis of *Nate Strikes Again*, that sequel will be welcome.



For animal lovers and poets *I Didn't Do It* (Harper Collins, '10) is a 'must read.' Patricia MacLachlan and her sister Emily MacLachlan Charest have created fourteen moderately lengthed poems that glimpse the puppy mind—from *Rules* (Sit! Stay! Down!) to *What I Like* (bubbles, shaking water all over the place, getting cookies); to *Puppy Dreams*. Each poem is accompanied by adorable paintings of irresistible puppies of assorted breeds, doing enthralling things as only puppies can. Katy Schneider, who has exhibited oil paintings nationwide, is the talented illustrator of this book; she excels at capturing that magnetic quality puppies generate. Readers can spend a pleasant hour



with this book, and find aspects of the poetry and art returning to mind long after.

Stolen (Chicken House, '10) is a first novel from Lucy Christopher, and an impressive debut. She crafts a complex and affective Young Adult story involving sixteen-year-old Gemma who is en route from England to Vietnam with her parents when she is drugged and abducted from the airport in Bangkok. This was not a chance occurrence. Gemma's kidnapper, a twenty-five-year-old Australian named Ty, has been watching her since she was a child and become obsessed with her. He has carefully planned this abduction.

Gemma awakens in the desolate Australian Outback, with only her kidnapper and assorted wildlife as company. Ty says he plans to keep her there forever, with the goal of making her eventually love him. He does not sexually abuse her nor treat her roughly; nevertheless, Gemma is every bit a captive. At first she hates both her kidnapper and the environment. But escape is impossible, and in time her defenses wear down. She finds herself attracted by the untamed power of the Outback and increasingly ambivalent toward her captor, warming as she comes to know him better. Ty's plan may be working: Gemma comes to realize she may be falling in love with him.

The structure of *Stolen* is unexpected and quite interesting. The story is related as a first-person narrative, in the form of a letter written by Gemma to Ty much later, following her release. This creates an unusual point of view, with Gemma being both participant and narrator, and the reader in the position of observing her gradually evolving attitudes and feelings as they unfold. Ty also evolves. He begins as a ruthless villain, but as Gemma learns more about his difficult youth and sees his caring behavior toward the wildlife in the Outback, he becomes more sympathetic. Certainly the circumstances leading finally to Gemma's release show consideration and compassion on his part. It is precisely this ambivalence that makes the novel such a powerful psychological study. The plot and narrative are both disturbing and absorbing—aspects which will stimulate thoughtful discussion. As noted earlier this is Christopher's first Young Adult novel. Reviewers will look forward to another, soon.

Tropical Rainforests (Harper Collins, '10) is the latest in a lengthy list of exceptional nonfiction books for children written by Seymour Simon. As often in the past, Seymour has teamed with the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute to bring to

light marvelous photographs of the rainforests of Central America, South America, central Africa, and Southeast Asia. This untamed world is home to brilliantly colored birds, multiple species of monkeys, poisonous butterflies, snakes, and thousands of animals and plants found nowhere else.

Seymour explains the four layers of growth stacked one on top of the other in the rainforest, from the 250-foot trees crowning the top-most emergent layer to the dense canopy just beneath, to the understory, and the dark forest floor which receives little sunlight. Each level has its own plant and animal life, and unique physical characteristics. The book contains spectacular photographs of representative species from each of the levels. The rainforest covers only about 2 percent of the world's surface but is extremely important to the global climate and human environment. The author details—but never in a tedious way—facts about the importance of the tropical forests in managing carbon emissions; he includes as well startling statistics about the rainforests' accelerating disappearance through logging and urban sprawl, and the devastating consequences if governments take no protective action.



There are a small but useful glossary and an index at the conclusion of the book, and well-selected links to enable readers to learn more about our Rainforests.

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