Mirrors & Windows

Zero, Joe Normal, Louis Sachar, and the View from Camp Green Lake

Maggie Parish

In Marvin Redpost: A Flying Birthday Cake?, one of seven Marvin Redpost books for early readers written by Louis Sachar, Marvin is camped out at night on his best friend's lawn for what should be a sleepover, when he finds that he can't sleep at all. "He had eaten too much cake. He had drunk too much punch. The ground was too hard." Marvin imagines not only that he hears, feels and sees a space ship flying overhead, but that the spaceship takes the form of a green birthday cake with candles for lights. The very next school day, a new kid named Joe Normal turns up in Marvin's class, and the teacher asks him where he is from. "Uh...Earth..." is the answer. "Just like you." But Joe Normal, it turns out, is not just like anybody. He is different, in fact, to be quickly labeled Joe Weird and a "door key" by Marvin's classmates, who have some pretty interesting eccentricities of their own. When they pointedly exclude Joe from all of their activities, Marvin wrestles with his conscience. He doesn't like seeing Joe left out, he tells his mother, but he is afraid that if he befriends Joe, his classmates will exclude him, too. "Maybe if you're nice to Joe, the other kids will be nice to him, too," his mother tells him. A few rounds of playing Joe's exotic "Wizzle Fish" game later, it turns out that Marvin's mother is exactly right. Any similarity between Marvin's empathetic mother, the wise, skillful school counselor named Carla in There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom, and Louis Sachar's wife, Carla, who is also a school counselor, should probably not be seen as coincidental. It's refreshing to encounter adults (Marvin's father included) in contemporary realistic fiction for children who function as such strongly competent parent figures. But then Sachar's work is not exactly contemporary realistic fiction. It seems more a unique, quirky, ironic-but-warm blend, kin to Beverly Cleary's books in its exact rendering of childhood detail and similar to E.L. Konigsburg's writing in its layering of dark chocolate meaningfulness beneath the appealing, funny, vanilla surface that makes child readers want to read and read and keep on reading.

This is not to say that all of Sachar's adult authority characters are admirable and trustworthy (or Konigsburg's, either, for that matter). In Sachar's Wayside School books, written at about the same reading level as the Marvin Redpost group, we meet Miss Gorf (or later the ghost of Miss Gorf when she is reincarnated as, say, potato salad) who wiggles her ears and turns non-compliant students into apples. We also meet another teacher who gives all A's, all praise, and all busy work in her no-exit classroom where students stay on one meaningless task or another for eternity - with regular ten minute breaks.

There is some foreshadowing in Louis Sachar's writing, then, of the surrealistic universe that we meet in the Newbery and National Book Award winning Holes, which is set in a juvenile detention camp where downright sinister adult figures play center stage. In Holes, the author's most acclaimed creation, it is difficult to determine who is the more evil - the warden who paints her nails with rattlesnake venom and scratches "offenders" as punishment, or the counselor, Mr. Pendansky, who mouths therapeutic platitudes so predictably that we become lulled into seeing him as actually but harmless - almost up to the time when he makes the suggestion that Stanley Yelnats be killed and his records erased in order to avoid any bureaucratic embarrassments for Camp Green Lake - a place where there is no lake, the water is rationed, and the "campers" must dig five by five by five holes in the hot sun each day in order to survive until the next one.

Is Stanley Yelnats a kissing cousin of Marvin Redpost? Not exactly. While incarcerated at Camp Green Lake, Stanley is so far removed from his loving but somewhat ineffectual family as to seem almost an orphan. He surely does not live his everyday life with the casual middle class comfortableness that Marvin Redpost does. And yet: are not both characters closely akin to the good-natured third son in folk tales, the less-than-perfect youngest brother who is kind and compassionate, a bit modest in fact, the one who wins the day (the princess, the treasure, the land) at the end of the story? In that sense, are both characters not to some degree also kin to Harry Potter and other fantasy heroes who rise from obscurity to a higher fate? Louis Sachar's central characters either have hearts or learn to have them. Triumphalists Laura and Gabriel, in Sixth Grade Secrets, for example, learn that the tricks they so much enjoy playing on their classmates can boomerang in ways that quickly take the fun out of things. Like the struggles of E.L. Konigsburg's characters, the central struggle of the characters in Sachar's books is with, and for, their own humanity. Sometimes they must even defeat the bully in themselves. The diction in Sachar's work, of the Girls' Bathroom, is simpler than Konigsburg's, the "reading level" often lower, but the profundity of the themes, the emphasis on children's thinking deeply about what is right and what is wrong and making careful choices, seem quite similar.

( Konigsburg's short stories, especially, seem to show this struggle at work.)

If Marvin Redpost and Stanley Yelnats can be compared and found to share some common traits, can we do the same thing with Joe Normal and Zero? I think we can. Louis Sachar does not seem to write about winners and losers so much as he writes about those who appear to be winning and those who appear to be losing and how things can turn around in unpredictable ways. The initially rejected Joe Normal, who wears the same clothes to school every day, can win quickly at a game the other kids play regularly - the very first time he plays it. He can eventually go on to teach a new game that everyone wants to play. He's different - but ultimately his differences do...
And Zero? He is truly reviled at the beginning of Holes. Unlike the other kids, whose given names Mr. Pendansky ploddingly insists on using, Zero is known by no other name than Zero. What’s more, Mr. Pendansky unhesitatingly tells Stanley (in Zero’s presence) that Zero is Zero’s name because there is nothing in his head. He insists Zero casually, without even considering that he might have feelings. Introduced to Zero in this way, most readers are probably surprised when Stanley, in the process of responding to Zero’s request to teach him how to read, figures out that Zero is a kind of mathematical wunderkind. A mathematics educator to whom I related this story reminded me that zero is the invaluable number that makes it possible for us to use the same ten digits to show any number, no matter how large or small. Next to Stanley, Zero turns out to be the most important figure in the book. After reading this book of my students suggested that Zero should be re-named Hero. Readers everywhere should learn that Hector Zeroni is Zero’s real name; he has been gifted with a first name that echoes back to The Iliad. And the Zeroni connection? All I will say here is that it amazed me to learn all the ways the author could make that connection work.

Zero is brave, a steadfast friend. He intervenes on Stanley’s behalf against the bullying of the others in their group. And after Stanley’s conscience sends him into the desert to look for Zero and try to save him from dying of thirst, Zero and Stanley, as friends, as a team, are able to survive and prevail in the desert, discovering the hidden treasure whose pursuit is driving the warden to madness. The fact that Zero has succeeded in learning to read is what turns the tide. Here I must mention that this book is very skillfully crafted of connections and coincidences. I am almost tempted to think that only some one trained in law, as Louis Sachar was, would put a book together in quite this way, but once again, I have to stop and think of Konigsburg in this time in connection with her multi-narrated, Newbery-winning The View from Saturday. Because of the way Sachar has organized his book, it comes as no surprise to us that the treasure chest Zero discovers in the desert is labeled with Stanley’s ancestor’s name, which is also Stanley’s own. When Stanley is saved from Camp Green Lake and from a charge of theft by this bit of evidence and by the appearance of his very own savvy lawyer with the state’s attorney general in tow, he insists on taking Zero with him. Rescuing Zero turns out to be not so difficult, because Camp Green Lake’s administrators have already expunged the homeless hero’s name from the records as completely as they can, assuming that he will conveniently die in the desert and be unremembered by not only the unethical and the uncaring, but also the uncurious. Stanley’s new-found legal representation erases their misconceptions; without the now-missing documentation, she insists, Camp Green Lake must let Zero go.

Not having (at that time) read any of Louis Sachar’s previous work, I was initially taken by surprise by the enormous popularity of Holes when I assigned it as reading for teachers and future teachers. Now I know that the book’s admirers readingship extends all the way into high school and includes many adults as well. Many young children have been introduced to the book, too. I know that it has been read aloud to many five graders, that they hear the book funny. How much did a focus on the symbols in the book enhance their understanding and enjoyment? I know (through email from his teacher) of one high school boy, a non-reader, who sat transfixed while he read the book from cover to cover. I wonder what he would have told me about this book if I could have heard his own voice? I know that a friend who works in a prison laughed when she read the book the first time, but did not laugh at all the second. I almost don’t think I need to ask her why. I wonder how many of you who are reading this column see the book in some of the same ways that I do. Or do not. I wonder what you see. Can you imagine this book for high school readers? Or not? (It might be especially interesting to hear from those of you who actually do not admire the book at all much, those who might prefer other Newberys to Holes.)

My own thinking is that twelve and up (which is not the age group that Sachar has previously written for) might be about right for reading Holes. In my mind the book connects not only with issues of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and friendship and betrayal; it also connects with the way our society has been dealing with its “throwaway children,” losing them in the foster care system, insisting that their mothers go to work no matter how ill-paid their jobs (see Nickle and Dimed) and at the same time refusing to fund first-class day care that could to some degree replace loving parents. Holes could easily connect, I think, with several other “real world” issues as well. (Private prisons?) But these connections would represent more the thinking of an adult or a young adult than that of a child.

Please write us about your thoughts and experiences regarding Holes - and, if you like, about the earlier column on Philip Pullman’s work as well. We would like to include some of your responses in an online forum presently under construction by the publisher of The Looking Glass. Send your emails to us; we would like to hear from you!

Maggie Parish

How would you survive? Thoughtfully Louis Sachar has learnt his knowledge and expertise to the subject and created this wonderful, quirky, and utterly essential guide to toughest it out in the Texan desert. Spiced with lots of information about the characters in “Holes”, as well as lots of do’s and don’ts for survival, this is an essential book for all those hundreds of thousands of “Holes” fans. About the Author. Louis Sachar lives in Texas where he creates his wonderful books. He writes for two hours a day and spends quite a lot of time walking his dog and Sachar, Louis. 1954-. Publication date. 2003. Should you ever find yourself at Camp Green Lake or somewhere similar this is the guide for you. Stanley Yelnats (Caveman, to some of you) offers anecdotes and advice on everything from digging the perfect hole to identifying and avoiding the wildlife (scorpions, tarantulas, rattlesnakes, yellow-spotted lizards, Mr. Sir) to help you make your stay more a pleasant one. Access-restricted item. True. Holes is a 1998 young adult novel written by Louis Sachar and first published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The book centers on an unlucky teenage boy named Stanley Yelnats, who is sent to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention center in a desert in Texas, after being falsely accused of theft. The plot explores the history of the area and how the actions of several characters in the past have affected Stanley's life in the present. These interconnecting stories touch on themes such as racism Excerpted from Holes by Louis Sachar Copyright © 2000 by Louis Sachar. Excerpted by permission of Yearling, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher. Membership Advantages. Reviews. “Beyond the Book” articles. Free books to read and review (US only). Find books by time period, setting & theme. Read-alike suggestions by book and author. Louis Sachar melds so successfully into the personage of Stanley Yelnats as to make the two one person, and we the reader are the recipient of the ensuing literature treat. The book is pretty straight forward, and gives the reader information about Camp Greenlake and the characters from Holes. flag Like - see review. Jul 08, 2018 Kim Hampton rated it really liked it · review of another edition. A short guide to life at Camp Green Lake by Stanley Yelnats from the book "Holes." Short but funny. It has info about some of the other characters also.

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How would you survive? Thoughtfully Louis Sachar has learnt his knowledge and expertise to the subject and created this wonderful, quirky, and utterly essential guide to toughing it out in the Texan desert. Spiced with lots of information about the characters in "Holes", as well as lots of do's and don'ts for survival, this is an essential book for all those hundreds of thousands of "Holes" fans. About the Author. Louis Sachar lives in Texas where he creates his wonderful books. He writes for two hours a day and spends quite a lot of time walking his dog and Sachar, Louis, 1954-. Publication date. 2003. Should you ever find yourself at Camp Green Lake or somewhere similar-this is the guide for you. Stanley Yelnats (Caveman, to some of you) offers anecdotes and advice on everything from digging the perfect hole to identifying and avoiding the wildlife (scorpions, tarantulas, rattlesnakes, yellow-spotted lizards, Mr. Sir) to help you make your stay a more pleasant one. Access-restricted-item. true. Holes is a 1998 young adult novel written by Louis Sachar and first published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The book centers on an unlucky teenage boy named Stanley Yelnats, who is sent to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention center in a desert in Texas, after being falsely accused of theft. The plot explores the history of the area and how the actions of several characters in the past have affected Stanley's life in the present. These interconnecting stories touch on themes such as racism. Excerpted from Holes by Louis Sachar Copyright © 2000 by Louis Sachar. Excerpted by permission of Yearling, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher. Reviews. "Beyond the Book" articles. Free books to read and review (US only). Find books by time period, setting & theme. Read-alike suggestions by book and author. Louis Sachar melds so successfully into the personage of Stanley Yelnats as to make the two one person, and we the reader are the recipient of the ensuing literature treat. The book is pretty straight forward, and gives the reader information about Camp Greenlake and the characters from Holes. flag Like · see review. Jul 08, 2018 Kim Hampton rated it really liked it · review of another edition. A short guide to life at Camp Green Lake by Stanley Yelnats from the book "Holes." Short but funny. It has info about some of the other characters also.