



The Snicket Letters

Article Author:

[Geoff Fox](#) [1]

Article Author:

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Geoff Fox and **John McLay** disagree on Lemony.

When **BfK** sent **Geoff Fox** the first two titles in Lemony Snicket's best selling series 'A Series of Unfortunate Events', **The Bad Beginning** and **The Reptile Room**, for review he gave them only two stars while conceding that 'plenty of children will think it's off the planet.' Now **Geoff Fox** and Snicket enthusiast, **John McLay**, argue the merits or demerits of the series...

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Dear John

I thought you should see the gist of the rather dyspeptic review I submitted to Rosemary which provoked her into suggesting this exchange of views. So here are a few excerpts:

'I disliked the first book intensely. I disliked the second rather less - maybe I had been battered into acquiescence by the relentless and obvious humour, the repetitious and self-conscious style, the predictability of the characters and the transparencies of the plots.

Of course these qualities, which upset most adult readers, are precisely what many young readers enjoy, especially in a series. The word from the bookshop tills is that the books are racing off the shelves; even our local university bookshop is selling them at £1 off.

I quite enjoyed the metafictional games played by Daniel Handler, the man behind Lemony Snicket. LS himself purports to be an investigator whose pursuit of the truth about the three Baudelaire orphans is highly dangerous. He steps out of his narrative from time to time to regret that his story is so miserably miserable and the villain so villainous. There are also mildly literary jokes which seem to be there for the diversion of adult readers: a lawyer named Mr Poe in these tales of not too much mystery but some imagination has a son called Edgar and one joke depends on recognising the name Roger Ackroyd, for example.

The orphans (mother and father are briskly wiped out in a fire in the opening pages of Book 1) are constantly pursued for their money by the wicked Count Olaf, a distant cousin. The plots have the wild implausibility which many children relish; for example, the physically repugnant Count, leader of an acting troupe of grotesques, forces Violet Baudelaire to act with him in a play. The script requires them to marry - and Olaf then claims the marriage is valid, thus entitling him to the orphans' fortune. The fantasy not far from the surface of this episode is fairly typical ('Violet imagined sleeping beside Count Olaf and waking up each morning to look at this terrible man').

I'm very aware of the dangers of reading children's books with an adult's perspective; but, for me, this series takes

children nowhere, several times over.?

Those were some of my reactions to the first two books, John. Now that I've read four of them, I'm mostly just *bored* by them. They are so formulaic. The plots are very similar: children, deposited by Poe in keeping of new inadequate/obsessive/unaware guardian, are menaced by disguised Count Olaf, and hop about between frying pans and fires (some entertaining predicaments here, I admit). Literally *hundreds* of times, Snicket peddles the same gags: Baby Sunny "shrieks" a nonsense word which is then glossed ("which probably meant something along the lines of...?"); again and again (and then again and again) he'll pause to explain a longish word with the formula "a word which means here..." How many times can you stand the same joke? And the caricatures are so flat. Consider Count Olaf (he can't intend to use him in all 13 books, can he?). He's a comic-paper baddie. From Iago to Philip Pullman's Mrs Coulter, what makes the best villains interesting, and in the end disconcerting, is their ambiguity.

What am I missing?

Geoff

Dear Geoff

You're probably not missing anything as such, but I do think you have succumbed to one of your own fears - and have consumed these books, inevitably, from a largely adult perspective. Your critique of "A Series of Unfortunate Events" is not really very helpful to either the children who might read them, nor to adults for whom they were not written anyway - despite the odd mature aside contained within.

Ten-year-olds love these books. Fact. They're funny. They're actually being read, and growing numbers of readers are going back for more. How many other books are bought and remain unread collecting dust on book shelves? More than we would probably think. These readers positively revel in all of the points you cite as negatives. Relentless and obvious humour, as you yourself admit, is glorious for the majority of young minds. Outlandish plots, the repetitious writing style and distinctly drawn characters are all winning ingredients. Series fiction relies wholly on a combination of these accessible and entertaining hooks to succeed. They deliver a knock-out punch with book 1, then serve up more of the same, with some degrees of variation, for as long as the concept remains commercial and popular. Lemony Snicket has struck gold in this sense, and I for one applaud him for it.

I can't help thinking that your whole approach to Lemony is a bit too deep. They're not Shakespeare, nor Pullman. I must admit I've not really analysed these books to any great extent. I sincerely hope nobody ever does, because I bet the author would laugh his head off if anybody ever did. When I read them, like many others of a more tender age, I suspect, I did so at a fair rate of knots and didn't try to deconstruct them for hidden messages or allegory. I very much doubt there are any.

Ten-year-old readers don't do this either. They know that they are ridiculous, enjoyable fantasies to be taken with the huge pinch of salt that the author intended. The storylines are a bit more grim than usual, but, hey, that's the point.

The publishers, Egmont in the UK and HarperCollins in the US, have used some extremely clever and witty marketing tools to bring the exploits of the Baudelaire orphans to a hungry readership. Declaring that book browsers should "not read these books" immediately makes them want to find out more. Warnings that they're slightly scurrilous are a huge come on. Getting people to protest in bookshops that they are giving the fictitious Happiness League a bad name is inspired. It's so obvious! And so clever. All successful marketing is, I suppose. Kids are picking them up and reading them and collecting them and talking about them and enjoying them as a result. Great news for all! No complaints here.

There's nothing wrong with Lemony Snicket. These books are funny but predictable. So what?

John

Dear John

Thanks for your reply. I think there's a difference between being serious about books for children and being stuffy about them. So when you say you think I'm being 'a bit too deep?' and that you've 'not really analysed these books to any great extent?', I part company from you. There's surely nothing wrong with depth, and nothing wrong with analysis, whether you are talking about Noddy or **Northern Lights**. In fact, close readings and speculations about reader responses are essential to those concerned with helping children to grow as readers (and teachers, librarians and parents want to do precisely that). And that's because, if I can say this without you accusing me of pomposity, children deserve the best.

But let me be clear - I do realise that, like the rest of us, they need what Peter Dickinson called thirty years ago 'literary roughage?'. My point is that there's roughage and roughage!

You're right that anyone who works day in day out with children and books is in trouble if they forget the headlong excitement of children's reading, the laughter, the hairs-on-the-back-of-the-neck stuff. I hope that whether as teacher, storyteller or writer, I've never forgotten that and indeed have spent much of my time listening to children talking about books. My reservations about the Snicket books arise mostly from a sense that other series offer so much more. And that here there is some slick, if manipulative, marketing at work, promoting some formulaic writing and clever packaging - and doing so very effectively. It's no argument to point to the huge sales figures as any indicator of worth, is it? I mean, on that basis, **Pop Idol** would emerge as high quality television, wouldn't it?

I'm genuinely glad LS's fans are reading, of course - but there's an ancient fallacy around in the notion that *all* pulp reading necessarily leads on to more discriminating reading. I think it often leads on to more pulp reading. And I think it's patronising, dishonest and uncaring for us to deny the hope that we want children to develop into discriminating readers.

A last point about series books. Consider the Just William and Harry Potter series. I'd suggest that they are characterised by inventive and surprising plots, sustained and varying wit, and above all, rich and playful language. They don't condescend to children. These qualities are not around in LS's books. In the end, I'm simply arguing that there's so much better reading around for children to enjoy.

Geoff

Dear Geoff

I'm definitely not accusing you of pomposity, have no fear. I respect your opinions too much to do so. Indeed I agree wholeheartedly with a number of points you make. It is highly desirable that children develop into discriminating readers and there is definitely nothing wrong with analysis. But I can't help thinking that the Lemony Snicket books are getting short shrift here, and that we should be celebrating what they are, and not trying to compare them to other series. Nobody has ever suggested they be required National Curriculum reading.

Of course they will fall down when Harry Potter is brought into the equation. Those books are a very different type of 'series?'. It's like comparing **Eastenders** to **Inspector Morse**. LS is intended for regular consumption, in shorter bursts, and as such these books deliver a very different type of 'hit?' for young readers.

I do disagree with you, however, when you call them 'pulp reading?' and 'condescending?'. They are simply a different type of reading that offer a different type of reading experience from Harry Potter and Just William. Children are enjoying these books in droves, and I think this is a marvellous thing. They're certainly not 'bad?' books, as I believe you are subtly trying to imply. Lemony Snicket is a positive phenomenon regardless of the publisher's slick marketing. Personally, I can't wait to read the next one?

John

Geoff Fox is Honorary Research fellow at Exeter University School of Education and Editor of **Children's Literature in Education**.

John McLay is a children's fiction scout and reviewer.

There are now five titles available in Lemony Snicket's 'A Series of Unfortunate Events': **The Bad Beginning** (0 7497 4611 4), **The Reptile Room** (0 7497 4612 2), **The Wide Window** (0 7497 4701 3), **The Miserable Mill** (0 7497 4702 1) and **The Austere Academy** (0 7497 4703 X). They are published by Egmont Children's Books at £5.99 each.

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