

Gooney Bird Greene

Posted on Mar 30, Posted by [Lois Lowry](#) Category [Uncategorized](#)

“And so,” Mrs. Pidgeon said, reading the final page of the book she was holding, “because the ant had worked very hard, he and his friends had food all winter. But the grasshopper had none, and found itself dying of hunger.”

“Oh, no!” Keiko wailed. “I hate stories where people die!”

Malcolm, who had been rolling paper into balls while he listened to the story, tossed a little paper pellet at Keiko. “It’s not people,” he pointed out. “It’s a dumb grasshopper! It’s only a grasshopper! Just a grasshopper!”

“Nobody cares if a grasshopper dies!” Tyrone said.

"I do," Keiko murmured sadly. She folded her arms on her desk and then laid her head down on her arms.

"It's only a fable," Mrs. Pidgeon said. She held up the book. "Aesop's Fables is the title. Aesop was a man who lived a very long time ago. He was the creator of all of these fables. Tomorrow I'll read you another."

"Not about anybody dying!" Keiko implored, raising her head.

"No," Mrs. Pidgeon agreed. She leafed through the book. "I won't read the 'The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing,' then, because I believe that one ends with the wolf eating the lamb—"

"Oh, nooooo!" Keiko put her head back down and groaned.

"But I could read 'The Fox and the Grapes.' I think you'll enjoy that one, Keiko. You had some nice grapes in your lunch last week. I remember that you passed them around. That was very generous."

Keiko looked up and nodded. "Red seedless," she reminded everyone, "from my parents' grocery store. But Malcolm started a squishing contest, so I'm not bringing grapes ever again."

It was true. And unfortunately some of Mrs. Pidgeon's second-graders had joined in Malcolm's grape-squishing contest enthusiastically. Lester Furillo, the school custodian at the Watertower Elementary School, had had to come in during recess with his Shop-Vac to clean the floor of the multipurpose room where the children ate their lunch each day.

Mrs. Pidgeon placed the Aesop book upright, so the cover was visible, on top of the bookcase near the windows. "Time for social studies," she said. "But first, who would like to tell me what the moral is in 'The Ant and the Grasshopper'? Hands, please."

She looked around. "Barry Tuckerman?" As usual, Barry's hand was waving in the air.

"What's a moral?" Barry asked.

"My goodness," Mrs. Pidgeon said, "I guess I should have explained that! Every fable has a moral. A moral is . . ." She hesitated. Then she said, "Class, this is an opportunity to use our new dictionaries!"

She wrote the word on the board: MORAL.

The room was silent for a moment except for the sound of pages turning, as all the second-graders looked through the brand-new dictionaries that they had recently been given.

Gooney Bird Greene found it first and raised her hand. She was wearing fingerless gloves today, and a long flannel dress with a ruffle around the bottom; it looked suspiciously like a nightgown. Gooney Bird was known for her unusual outfits.

When Mrs. Pidgeon pointed to her, Gooney Bird stood and read aloud, " 'A conclusion about how to behave, based on events in a story.' "

"Good dictionary work, Gooney Bird," said the teacher. "And so what was the moral of the fable about the ant and the grasshopper? What was the conclusion about how to behave?"

Gooney Bird rolled her eyes. "I could tell you," she said, "but I think it would be better if Malcolm did, because Malcolm is the one who needs advice on behavior!"

Mrs. Pidgeon chuckled. "Malcolm?" she said, pointing to him. He had the lid of his desk raised, and was shuffling the papers inside.

"What?" he asked, looking out from behind the raised lid.

“Could you tell us, please, what behavior we learned from the fable I just read?”

“Huh?”

Mrs. Pidgeon jiggled her knee. She always did that when she felt impatient. “Malcolm,” she said, “I just read the class a story, a fable, actually, about a grasshopper and an ant. Maybe you didn’t listen well. The ant worked very hard collecting and storing food, while the grasshopper just played and chirped. Then when winter came, the ant and his fellow ants all had plenty to eat, but the grasshopper—”

“Starved!” Keiko wailed. “And died!”

Tricia reached over and patted Keiko’s back, to comfort her.

“So, Malcolm,” Mrs. Pidgeon went on, “what do we learn from the story?” Malcolm thought. “Don’t step on ants,” he said at last. “If ants are there, don’t step on them. Never step on ants.”

Mrs. Pidgeon sighed. She was silent for a long time. Everyone had noticed that Malcolm had recently begun saying everything three times. He couldn’t seem to help it. They were all trying to ignore it, but sometimes it was difficult. The second-graders watched Mrs. Pidgeon. Finally she said, “Let’s get out our social studies books, class. Turn to the chapter called ‘Cities and Towns,’ please.”

Those are the opening paragraphs of the third Gooney Bird Greene book, due to be published in April. Rest assured that it is not a book with a moral. It is just one more adventure in the lives of a group of second graders and their teacher as they learn about themselves and about the art of story-telling.

The reason Malcolm has begun to say everything three times, incidentally, is because he is a little overwhelmed by the baby triplets in his family. Has anyone else noticed how multiple births are taking over? I have two pairs of grand-twins (actually, step-grand-twins), all girls. My brother has twin granddaughters. My cousin has twin granddaughters. My friend Sally has triplet granddaughters. So it would seem that GIRLS, as well as multiples, are taking over the world, maybe not a bad thing, ho ho? But my doctor has just returned from paternity leave...twins, boy and girl. So a few males are being dealt from the pack, too.

Malcolm's triplet siblings are two boys and a girl, if i remember correctly...I'd have to check the previous book.

And now I am off with two friends to see a movke called "In Great Silence" which is, I am led to believe, 3 hours about a group of monks in the Carpathian mountains. Great silence, and not much happening; if I had triplet babies I would probably want to run off and join that monastery myself.

Incidentally, I visited...just as a tourist, not a pilgrim...a very isolated monastery in Slovakia last fall, when I was traveling in Eastern Europe. A monk who spoke some English came and sat at a table with our small group and said he would answer questions. So a few people asked very polite and humble questions which he answered with, I thought, pious platitudes. So I asked him: "Tell the truth: did you all sit around drinking beer and watch the soccer championships on TV?" But he ignored me and didn't answer.

It occurs to me that I just nominated mysslf for the (described in a recent post) Carol Otis Hurst Irrepressible Irreverence Award, except that it is unrelated to children's books.

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