

Ooops, My Mistake

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I mused a couple of days ago about typos. Now...because one has just been brought to my attention (more about that in a minute),...I want to talk a bit about real errors in books. My errors, my books. I assume other people and other books have errors as well, but I'll only be apologetic and humble about my own.

Readers love to spot mistakes. Especially young readers. They even examine book jackets closely to see if anything is inconsistent, and often something is, usually in paperback, because the illustrator creating the jacket has not had the time, or taken the time, to read the book thoroughly and get every detail right. So you get the letters saying "How come the girl on the cover has dark hair, but inside the book it says..." The author doesn't KNOW the artist, so can't write back and say grouchily, "Blame Mr. Joe Crayola, who did that picture.."

The author just has to, as kids say, suck it up.*

But then there are the other errors. Errors of fact, or logic. Once I wrote a book, Anastasia's Chosen Career, in which Anastasia is watching a friend get a haircut. It describes the friend's hair being washed. Then the beautician, in preparation for the cut, removes a plastic barrette.

"Wouldn't she have removed the barrette first, before she washed her hair?" a reader wrote me.

Well, picture me slapping the side of my head in acknowledgment of my own stupidity. Of course she would remove the barrette first! My mistake. Mea culpa. And my only excuse, not a good one, is that it has been sixty years since I last wore a plastic barrette in my hair.

More serious errors: in *The Giver*, the child Lily is portrayed as having a stuffed animal beyond the age at which the comfort objects are taken away. I realized this mistake existed after the

hard-cover book was published but before the paperback came out. I asked the paperback publisher to make a correction – I re-wrote a couple of sentences to make everything right – and they said they would, but never did.

I don't know the mechanics of publishing but I believe it is very unwieldy and expensive to make such a change, so perhaps that is why it didn't happen.

In *Gathering Blue* there is a misspelling, and what should be "poison" is instead "pioson" – not a biggie. But there are also a couple of places when the wrong person's name is used, so that in dialogue, it has Tom speaking at a time when Tom is not in the room; the speaker should have been someone else: Matt, I think. Confusing. And my fault.

In *Gooney Bird Greene*, a child speaks of her cat, when earlier in the book it mentions that she is allergic and therefore doesn't have a pet. Again, my fault. A book gets written over the course of many weeks, sometimes months, and the author sometimes forgets who has allergies and who has curly hair and who has a cat and who – whatever.

Here is where a third person enters the picture: the copy editor. The copy editor is the anonymous person at the publishing company who reads the final manuscript carefully, looking for inconsistencies and raising questions for the author to address. Sometimes it is something small, but important, like, "You used this adjective in the last paragraph; would you like to choose a different one here?" And I am grateful that they spotted it, and I make the change.

Quite recently – in the book *Gooney the Fabulous* – not yet published – there is reference made to a nickel with a buffalo on one side of it. The copy editor pointed out that an American nickel has Thomas Jefferson on one side, and Monticello on the other. That is true. I amended the book to mention those. But I told the copy editor (telling a copy editor means, actually, scribbling a little note below her note) that there is another American nickel which has a buffalo. I scanned one into my computer and will have it here forever, just to use as a reply to everyone who writes me about the buffalo issue.

The copy editor is the one who also raises (or neglects to raise) questions like, Wouldn't she have removed the barrette? or Why does Lily still have the stuffed elephant? or Didn't this child have an allergy to cats? So, technically, I could blame those inconsistencies on the copy editor,

whom I have never met but is probably a nice person with a rich inner life. But I'm not going to. Those errors are mine. When kids write and point them out to me, I usually tell them that it's a way of reminding them that authors are human, and sometimes do stupid things.

The reason I am thinking about all of this today is because I have just received an email from the mother of a kindergarten student. Rebecca, she says, loves the Gooney Bird books, which they are reading together. But she found an error in Gooney Bird and the Room Mother. Throughout the book, the second grade's room mother has been – by her own choice – incognito. Only in the last pages is she revealed as the second grade teacher – Mrs. Pidgeon's – own mother.

She wouldn't have the same name as her married daughter, Rebecca, age six, points out. So the reader still doesn't know her name. She is still incognito!

Absolutely right. And I invited Rebecca to name the room mother – to tell us what Mrs. Pidgeon's mom's name is. It won't be in the book, of course, because the book is already published. But I will try to work it into the next Gooney Bird book, because the name she decided upon is so spectacular that it deserves - well, if not fame, at least exposure.

Mrs. Pidgeon's mom - the room mother - is now officially named XENIA CASSIOPEIA !

And here is how Rebecca chose it, according to her mom: She wanted a name beginning with X, because Mrs. Pidgeon's second graders had referred to the room mother as Mrs. X. Not many choices! But Xenia was one, and they looked up its meaning - "hospitable" - and found, also, that it was Greek. So in looking for a Greek last name, Rebecca loved the sound of Cassiopeia. Her mom cringed at a little, but hey: it was Rebecca's choice and I think it has a real ring to it. Cassiopeia means "clever" and I think Rebecca is a very clever little girl. Probably hospitable, too.

And incidentally: isn't it terrific that somebody six years old will forever know the word incognito and its meaning? Who says that vocabulary has to be dumbed down for young readers?

* split infinitive. I know that.



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