

Banned Books Month:

Guest Post from Mary Amato: The Sin of Silliness

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“Mary Amato, why do you write such silly books?”

I was in an elementary school's library in Illinois, autographing a stack of pre-ordered books after a school wide presentation when the second-grade boy asked me this question. I assumed the boy was there to pick up a book he had ordered and that his question was rhetorical.

As an author, I am invited to schools around the country. Often schools offer sales of my work so that kids can get a signed copy of a favorite title.

“Which book did you order?” I asked.

“I'm not allowed to read your books,” he said.

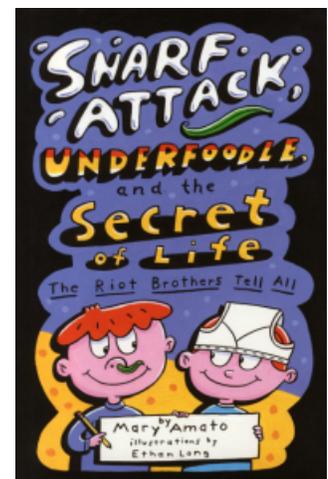
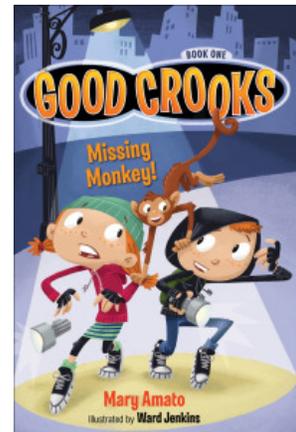
I dropped my pen. “What?”

“My dad won't let me,” he said. “They're too silly. Why do you have to write silly ones? I really want to read one.” He was dead serious.

“Has your dad read my books?” I asked.

“No. He looked at *that*.” He pointed to the cover of my book SNARF ATTACK on the order form that the librarian had prepared and printed.

Yes, one boy on the book cover has underpants on his head. Yes, the other one has a green bean sticking out of his nostril. Yes, silliness abounds. The series is about two



brothers named Orville and Wilbur Riot who have a mission to make something exciting happen every day. They are inventive, curious, funny, and, yes, often silly.

Reluctant readers, kids who find reading to be a chore, or kids who just haven't found a book that excites them yet often need a heavy dose of humor to pull them in. This alone is reason for me to tap into my inner child when writing for young readers. Often, though, I'm not consciously trying to be funny. I get into character when I am writing, and if the main character happens to be a seven-year-old kid, I just end up saying and doing funny things as that character. I believe children are naturally funny because they see the world through such fresh eyes.

My books aren't just silly, though. If you get past the cover, you find that Orville and Wilbur are incredibly loving. My inspiration to write the series came from reading a biography about Orville and Wilbur Wright.

The Wright Brothers. I learned that as children, the brothers were great, affectionate friends. At the time, I had two sons who happened to be in a bickering stage. Lots of books they were reading emphasized and exploited sibling rivalry. I consciously created



big, loving hearts in Orville and Wilbur. I wanted to explore the idea that you can have fun with your sibling. I didn't want to hit the reader over the head with the message, but it's there. As a mom, I imagined other parents would find this to be a sweet bit of frosting on the cake if they were reading the books with their kids and enjoying the laughs.

The books also contain what I call "moments of gratitude." These are moments during which the boys are filled to the brim with appreciation for something— for each other, for their single mom, or for the beauty of the world around them. Why? Because I believe kids feel and take seriously those intense moments, and I want even my humorous books to ring true.

Here's a moment from **SNARF ATTACK** when the boys head outside. It's evening and their mom is practicing the cello.

The night was black and cold and silent, except for the crunching of our boots on the snow and the singing of the cello behind us, which sounded very far away. We walked to

the middle of our backyard and stopped. Yesterday, and after school today, we had played in the front, so the snow back here was untouched.

Orville made a kind of gasp in his throat. "This is the best kind of snow," he whispered. "The no-footprint kind."

I nodded, and we looked at the world stretched out, glistening in the moonlight.

As an author of books for children and teens, I get fan mail that often brings me to tears. The letters that I've gotten from parents and kids about the Riot Brothers have provided me with some of my proudest moments.

- *My son didn't like to read until he picked up the Riot Bros, now he can't stop.*
- *Orville and Wilbur have turned my non-reader into a reader.*
- *When I read your book I laughed to the ground!*
- *Would you please please write another one?*

In that school library, I was receiving a very different kind of feedback and it got me thinking. I wondered why the father was so against the concept of silliness. I wondered if some people equate silliness with bad behavior and assume that children will "misbehave" if they read silly books. I wondered how many parents teach their children to judge books by their covers.

Currently, I have a new series called GOOD CROOKS. The books are about twins who have a deep and burning desire to do good deeds. The problem is they have parents who are infamous crooks; but the big hearts and strong moral compasses of the kids triumph every time and they manage to not only do good deeds, but also to thwart crime along the way. Will there be parents who refuse to let their kids read my new books, assuming that they are about kids who commit crimes and that their own children would become criminals if exposed to them?

All these thoughts were running through my head as the boy waited for my answer. Why do I write silly books?

"Because I think kids like them," I said. "I wish your dad would read them."

"Me too," he said, and he walked out empty-handed.

Mary Amato.

Mary Amato is an award-winning author of books for children and young adults. Many of her books have been translated into foreign languages and appeared on state reading lists. She teaches workshops on writing and is also a singer-songwriter. Her latest YA is called *Get Happy* and features songs on ukulele. She thinks it is hilarious when principals introduce her to students by saying, “Today, we get to meet a real, live author!” She is very happy not to be a fake, dead author. That would not be as fun. You can find her at www.maryamato.com or <https://twitter.com/maryamato>