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Dragonbreath (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Vernon, Ursula. *Dragonbreath*; written and illus. by Ursula Vernon. Dial, 2009 [160p]. ISBN 978-0-8037-3363-3\$12.99 Reviewed from galleys R Gr. 2-5

The only dragon at the Herpitax-Phibbias School for Reptiles and Amphibians, Danny Dragonbreath faces some obstacles: he's constantly faced with classmates who don't believe that dragons exist, he's bullied by a classmate, and he can't breathe **[End Page 43]** fire, no matter how many times his dad coaches him to "think hot thoughts"; he also just got an F on a science paper about the ocean and he needs to redo it. Mom suggests paying a visit to Cousin Edward, a sea serpent, and Danny, along with his best buddy Wendell, an iguana, are soon off on a madcap adventure to the bottom of the sea. Part chapter book, part graphic novel, this is a quick read packed with hilarious situations and punchy dialogue. The graphic portions are reminiscent of the Holms' Babymouse series, with colors restricted to black and one accent color (in this case, green), inanimate objects (here, potato salad) starring in dramatizations, and imaginary flights of fantasy allowing the protagonist to compensate for his shortcomings (Danny fancies himself a fire-breathing pirate). Cautious Wendell is the perfect sidekick for Danny's wacky ideas, having learned long ago that being Danny's friend means being "prey to his sudden enthusiasms." While the ocean adventure, which includes an attack by a giant squid, is even less realistic than the school story, readers will cheer for Danny and Wendell all the way through to Danny's success in earning that A. The graphic portions both continue the narrative flow of the text and offer asides to the central story; the combination works and readers will easily shift between the two formats. This is great stuff for reluctant and rapacious readers alike; fortunately, a sequel (involving ninja frogs) is alluded to in the final pages.

she once saw at the zoo), she rejects the friendly overtures of her neighbor, Polly, whose father was killed in an accident a few years ago. That family crisis is another reason for Camille to steer clear of Polly, since Camille's parents are increasingly embattled, and Camille is trying desperately to convince herself that her family isn't going to change. Debut novelist Tracy develops a wonderful voice for Camille, innocent and vivid and deeply comic ("I was expecting my own life to be terrific, lengthy, and at some point filled with ponies"), and there's a deft balance between plausible blindness and reader-helpful enlightenment about her motives. Yet her anxiety about her family's strain is keenly felt, and this is actually an unusually vivid portrayal of a parental marriage drifting into a downward spiral (a portrait unfortunately undermined by the speedy everything's-suddenly-solved ending). The blend of humor and truthfulness ("I knew that I lied to my father, but I had no idea he lied back") will speak to young readers, who will sympathize with Camille and rejoice in her eventually improved lot. DS

TURNER, PAMELA S. *The Frog Scientist*; illus. with photographs by Andy Comins. Houghton, 2009. 58p. (Scientists in the Field)
ISBN 978-0-618-71716-3 \$18.00 R* Gr. 5-8

Frogs aren't just photogenic book subjects, they're possible indicators of environmental damage. That's the hypothesis that biologist Dr. Tyrone Hayes seeks to explore as he tests the effects of atrazine, a chemical now common in the water that constitutes froggy habitats, on frogs. This new volume in the Scientists in the Field series follows Dr. Hayes and his young research assistants (most of them college students, but his young son, Tyler, also accompanies him in the field) as they gather their amphibian subjects, set up the experiment, dissect the frogs to assess the effects (they're looking to see if the chemical changes male frogs' testes into eggs), and assess the results. Along the way, Turner gives insight into Hayes' background (after growing up in segregated small-town South Carolina, he struggled as one of the few African-American biology students at Harvard) and the scientific method itself, explaining experimental structure and blinded research in context. The result is a nifty narrative that conveys science in action, offers some insight into environmental damage, and provides a vivid portrait of an energetic and charismatic (and hunky) young scientist who's clearly inspiring students to take an interest in the field. The visually appealing layout is thick with images of people, making it easy to envision the realities of biological work, and of frogs, from hopping to undergoing dissection. Young readers looking to move beyond *Nic Bishop Frogs* (BCCB 3/08) will find plenty of fodder here, but this is even more useful as an introduction to the creation and execution of an experiment, and it will therefore be invaluable in science classes. End matter includes a glossary, a portrait gallery of featured frogs and toads, a list of websites and other resources (including publication information for Tyrone's scientific articles), and an index. DS

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