

## Children's Literature Reviews

Item 50 of 130

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### The bronze pen

*Zilpha Keatley Snyder.*

*Cataloging in Publication*

New York : Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2008.

p. cm.

### Annotations:

With her father's failing health and the family's shaky finances, twelve-year-old Audrey's dreams of becoming a writer seem very impractical until she is given a peculiar bronze pen that appears to have unusual powers.

### Horn Book Guide:

Fall 2008 Intermediate Fiction Rating 3, Recommended, satisfactory in style, content, and/or illustration.

### Reading Measurement Programs:

Accelerated Reader

Interest Level Middle Grade

Book Level 6

Accelerated Reader Points 7

Lexile, MetaMetrics, Inc.

Lexile Measure 960

Reading Counts-Scholastic

Interest Level 3-5

Reading Level 7.5

Title Point Value 11

Lexile Measure 960

### Reviews:

#### **Jennifer Mattson (Booklist, Feb. 15, 2008 (Vol. 104, No. 12))**

The winner of three Newbery Honors and an ace at blending light fantasy with realism, Snyder knows just how to allow magical elements to swell gradually from whispers to shouts, and how to open her characters' minds to uncanny possibilities. Here, 12-year-old Audrey's experimentation with an enchanted pen develops alongside equally compelling personal situations, including her father's debilitating illness and a new friendship with quirky Lizzie Morales, a terrific, memorable character. The 1970s setting, crucial to understanding why the father's angina is characterized as a death sentence, may be too lightly emphasized to avoid confusing readers whose parents or grandparents live full lives with heart disease. Still, at a time when children interested in fantasy often must tackle elaborate, lengthy novels written for a broad age range, this squarely middle-grade offering will find a grateful audience—especially, perhaps, among aspiring young writers like Audrey, who will emerge eager to swap computer keyboards for bronze pens of their own. *Grades 4-6*

#### **Gwynne Spencer (Children's Literature)**

Audrey is an only child and a writer. Her imagination and stamina serve her well in stories, until she meets up with a large white duck that entices her to a hidden hillside cave where a birdlike old woman (or an old-woman-

like bird) gives her a special gift: a bronze pen. Audrey is advised to use it to write wisely and to good purpose (a lesson that all writers may need to have burned in their hearts). Other stories are woven into the main story, including one about Lizzie, the gifted artist who is Audrey's good friend and trusting confidante during the weirdest of the weirdnesses that take place when Audrey discovers that the bronze pen has special powers and can make the words she writes come true! Another story thread involves Audrey's hardworking mother Hannah, whose beautiful eyes are legendary, and whose boss is mean and relentless. Add the image of Audrey's father, once hale and hearty and now reduced by heart disease to invalid-status and in need of Audrey's stories. Then there is the dog, Wulfie (enormous and intelligent) and a miscreant bird named Sputnik whose language is pretty raw and whose flight path when released from his cage is orbital. All these elements combine to high drama, good fiction in the tradition of Snyder's *Egypt Game* in which the obvious and mundane morph into weird and ominous new forms. Audrey learns that the pen and its magic powers can be dangerous as well as delightful. Ultimately, she learns the true meaning of the lesson: Write wisely and to good purpose, not for selfish wishes or wealth. Also of note: The "Green-Sky" series, beginning with *Below the Root*, which has long been out of print, has been reissued and is once again available in paperback. 2008, Atheneum Books for Young Readers/Simon & Schuster, \$16.99. Ages 10 to 17.

**Kirkus (Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2008 (Vol. 76, No. 3))**

It seems quite natural for Audrey to follow the duck up the hill to the cave with the old woman in it. When she tells the old woman that her most deeply held dream is to become an author, the woman gives her a bronze pen and the injunction to "use it wisely and to good purpose." Being an author is about the only thing that brings Audrey any joy: Her father is an invalid, wheelchair-bound because of a heart condition, and her mother toils in a miserable job to pay the family's bills. When Audrey realizes that what she writes with her bronze pen comes true, she begins to experiment with ways to change her world . . . but the results are not always what she expects. Veteran Snyder does what she does best, blending grim reality with fantasy so skillfully both Audrey and readers have trouble discerning the boundaries. Secondary characters, from Audrey's peppery new friend to her pets, emerge fully realized. It's a solid, slightly old-fashioned inquiry into the power of the pen, the limits of hope and the necessity of dreams. 2008, Atheneum, 208p, \$16.99. Category: Fiction. Ages 8 to 12. © 2008 Kirkus Reviews/VNU eMedia, Inc. All rights reserved.

**Ruth Cox Clark (Library Media Connection, October 2008)**

Twelve-year-old Audrey fills notebooks with short stories and mystery novels she has written. Often she climbs the hill behind her home to write. She is here when the white duck appears and beckons her to follow. Being a writer, readily able to suspend her sense of disbelief, Audrey follows the persistent duck right up to the cave where she meets a peculiar old woman who gives her a mysterious gift—a bronze pen—and tells her to use it wisely. Perhaps it wasn't wise to tell her new friend Lizzie about the pen's power of bringing to life what she writes about, but Audrey just had to tell someone about the dragon under her bed. Lizzie is a willing partner in experimenting with what the pen can do. If only wishes written with the pen could heal Audrey's father's heart. Set during the 1970s, young readers of today may not understand why her father is wasting away and expected to die from angina, but they will have no difficulty understanding Audrey's desire for him to be well again as they join Audrey and Lizzie on their adventures with the bronze pen. Recommended. 2008, Atheneum (Simon & Schuster), 208pp., \$16.99 hc.

**April Spisak (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, April 2008 (Vol. 61, No. 8))**

Preteen Audrey is an obedient, easygoing girl with one big secret: she is a fiction writer. Her aspirations to be a famous author take an interesting detour when a magical duck leads Audrey to a mysterious cave containing a peculiar old woman who offers her the gift of a pen. Of course, such a chain of events can only lead to mystical goings-on with the pen, as Audrey discovers when things she writes begin to come true. Although it takes her a bit to catch on, Audrey soon realizes that she could use this pen for significant good to help her mother, who is struggling with her boss, or her father, who is seriously ill. However, claiming magic for one's own goals is always a slippery exercise, and although the protagonist gets much of what she wants, it is not quite clear whether a pen, luck, or hard work has the final impact. Snyder has developed an intriguing and nicely balanced cast, surrounding Audrey with quirky, complex, and memorable characters. Unfortunately, Audrey herself is a bit too well-behaved, gullible, and short-sighted to keep readers strongly engaged with her personally. In addition, the underdeveloped and vaguely referenced context of the 1973 Californian landscape in which the novel takes place seems an unnecessary distraction in what could otherwise be a story anywhere or anytime about a girl who will take intervention wherever it can be found, whether in magic or her own talents. Nevertheless, the overall emphasis on the power of story to change the world (in small or significant ways) will not be lost on fiction

readers, most of who certainly wouldn't mind a pen that could conjure up their own fantastic imaginings Review Code: Ad -- Additional book of acceptable quality for collections needing more material in the area. (c) Copyright 2006, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. 2008, Atheneum, 200p., \$16.99. Grades 4-6.

**Horn Book (The Horn Book Guide, Fall 2008)**

Audrey is an imaginative twelve-year-old with a talent for writing. While exploring a cave near her home, she meets an old woman who gives her a magical bronze pen. When Audrey uses it, she finds that her tales literally come to life. This touching story about love, family, and friendship is full of humor and adventure. Category: Intermediate Fiction. 2008, Atheneum, 200pp, 16.99. *Ages 9 to 12*. Rating: 3: Recommended, satisfactory in style, content, and/or illustration.

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