

## Children's Literature Reviews

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### TruckDogs : a novel in four bites

*Graeme Base as told to him by his dog Molly.*

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New York : Amulet Books, 2004.

145 p. : col. ill. ; 24 cm.

#### Annotations:

Two gangs of canine-like motor vehicles, the Rott Wheelers and the Mongrel Pack, have a showdown in the town of Hubcap.

#### Awards, Honors, Prizes:

[Kids Reading Oz Choice \(KROC\) Awards](#) Winner 2004 Australia

#### State and Provincial Reading Lists:

[Indian Paintbrush Book Award, 2005-2006](#) ; Nominee; Wyoming

#### Horn Book Guide:

Fall 2004 Intermediate Fiction Rating 4, Recommended, with minor flaws.

#### Reading Measurement Programs:

Accelerated Reader

Interest Level Middle Grade

Book Level 4.9

Accelerated Reader Points 4

#### Reviews:

##### **Stephanie Zvirin (Booklist, Feb. 15, 2004 (Vol. 100, No. 12))**

Base's latest novel, "told to him by his dog Molly," is possibly his quirkiest yet. The plot, a heroic fantasy of sorts, will be comfortably familiar: a stranger brings stodgy adult townfolk and bored, energetic, "delinquent" youth together to battle marauding evildoers who would destroy the town. Of course, it's the characters that provide the punch, and they are unforgettable. With names like Sparky Plugg and Rex, they are a surprising, complicated amalgam of human, vehicle, and dog, eagerly snorting, backfiring, and digging their way through the action, and providing glorious opportunity for wordplay, slapstick comedy, and excitement. That is, of course, if readers can keep them straight--a distinct problem at the outset, when details of their peculiarities nearly sink the story. Did Molly bite off more than she could chew? Some kids will certainly think so, but Base's clever picture-portraits help in the sorting, and patient readers whose own imaginations tend to work overtime are bound to come away grinning; the good guys win, and there are plenty of dog biscuits and full tanks to go around. Category: Books for Middle Readers--Fiction. 2004, Abrams, \$16.95. *Gr. 4-6.*

##### **Claudia Mills, Ph.D. (Children's Literature)**

What, may you ask, are TruckDogs? They are strangely evolved creatures, half dog, half truck, like Bullworth (a combination bulldog and bulldozer), Digger (a combination Labrador and back hoe), and Prudence (a combination

dachshund and fuel-tanker road train), whose "shiny black bodywork was set off by purple fenders and underbelly and a pair of tall chrome exhaust stacks behind her long ears." The story itself is a classic western: the young and fairly wild Mongrel Pack are banished from the respectable burg of Hubcap for their excessive hijinks, but return, led by our hero, young Sparky, and a wise old broken-down mechanic TruckDog, Rex, to save the town from an invasion of marauding RottWheelers. At the end of the day, justice is done, the Mongrel Pack are acclaimed as heroes, the bad guys are safely behind bars, and Rex rides off into the sunset of the Australian Outback, heading to "Somewhere I haven't been before, I reckon." Along the way there is hilarious dialogue and action aplenty, all making full use of the DogTruck theme. The large cast of characters is somewhat hard to keep track of, for readers less familiar with various automotive and canine categories, but Base assists with sixteen color plates providing detailed portraits of each main character, with highly amusing data on color, identifying marks, temperament, fuel requirements, and maintenance schedule. If "every TruckDog has its day," Base's quirky creations deserve theirs, indeed. 2004, Amulet/Harry N Abrams, \$16.95. Ages 8 to 12.

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

If you've been on the road too long, I guess your brain gets starved for stories. That may account for what happened to Graeme Base, best known for his lush illustrations for picture books (*Animalia*, *The Eleventh Hour*, *The Discovery of Dragons*). He claims that his dog Molly made up the stories, and he just did the pictures (16 full color plates), but these days it's hard to know who to believe. *Truck Dogs* is a four-part story about a world where dogs and trucks have evolved together into Truck Dogs--they have fur, floppy ears and wet noses, and tires, bumpers, hoods and truck bodies. The back cover shows a tail underneath which is a strategically placed gas cap. Truck Dogs are either animals with an engine or vehicles with wet noses. They gnaw on lamp posts but deeply crave diesel fuel and serious off-road tires. And then there are the "bad dogs" in the Mongrel Pack (no home, no owner, no good sense whatsoever) who are despised and worse by the townsfolk of Hubcap. One young Truck Dog becomes a hero and saves the world, and all Truck Dogs (and dogs and truckers) will be glad to share in his story. This is NOT heavy reading; you can digest it all in one sitting. But it will start your imagination going--what kind of Truck Dog are you? This one will delight those NASCAR kids and grownups who love trucks an awful lot. 2004, Amulet Books/Abrams Books for Young Readers, \$16.95. Ages 10 to adult.

### **Kirkus (Kirkus Reviews, March 1, 2004 (Vol. 72, No. 5))**

In a surreal yet compelling alternate Australia, where all creatures are vehicle/animal hybrids, a village of TruckDogs faces extinction. Plucky Sparky, the mayor's son, adores the wild kids of the Mongrel gang. But even if Hercules, Zoe, and the rest accept him, his mother would never allow it. The cantankerous citizens of Hubcap don't like ruckus, and the Mongrels are canines-non-grata around town. Only Rex, the battered mechanic with a mysterious past, shows quiet sympathy for Sparky and the Mongrels. When Sparky's over-exuberance gets the Mongrels expelled from town, Hubcap rejects its heart: its children. But there's no time for sadness: a bandit gang, the RottWheelers, has come to steal the town's precious petrol. In the battle for Hubcap, the Mongrels will show their sterling qualities and the townspeople will reveal hearts of gold. Oddities abound: Where are all the other children? And how is it that animals that are trucks with dog heads manage to be quite so athletic? But the charm of this bizarre tall tale shines through. Quite strange, quite good. (glossary, list of full-color plates and TruckBug identification) 2004, Amulet/Abrams, 192p, \$16.95. Category: Fiction. Ages 10 to 14. © 2004 Kirkus Reviews/VNU eMedia, Inc. All rights reserved.

### **John Jacob (The ALAN Review, Spring/Summer 2004 (Vol. 31, No. 3))**

A lot of ingenuity went into this book for middle readers of a world peopled by amalgams between machinery and animals. It is the hero's story about mongrel town dogs helping save the town from another town's "bad dogs." The writer is Australian; any older reader may notice almost exact duplications from the film, "The Road Warrior." In the film, a "feral child" throws a boomerang; here, our dog hero throws a "spanner" (wrench). Middle readers, especially those interested in art, might really enjoy this tale, with its old man with wisdom, its young hero, and color plates that show how the dogs and the vehicles are put together. The idea itself is quite original. Instead of chapters, the book has "bites," and some of the dogs are a Jack Russell, Great Dane, Irish Setter, and a Mastiff, all joined in some way to bulldozers, ore trucks, a Ford 50 pickup, a Land Rover, and a tractor, among many. The story takes place in the future; otherwise, this is a Mad Max/Kung Fu meets Lassie. It is worth a glance or two, and the cover is great. Category: Adventure/Dogs//Science. YA--Young Adult. 2004, Fiction Amulet Books, 145 pp., \$16.95. Ages young adult. Oak Park, IL

### **Horn Book (The Horn Book Guide, Fall 2004)**

A bizarre premise—a society populated by creatures that are "half vehicle, half dog"—frames this story of the

Mongrel Pack, a group of rowdy young canines who, when their town is attacked by the marauding RottWheeler gang, save the day. Color illustrations of various canine/truck hybrids will draw readers, but the attenuated story may not hold them. Category: Intermediate Fiction. 2004, Abrams/Amulet, 145pp, \$16.95. *Ages 9 to 12*. Rating: 4: Recommended, with minor flaws.

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