

Gwynne Spencer
PO Box 121
Mancos, CO 81328
gwynnespencer@aol.com
www.gwynnespencer.com

Cosmic Raccoon November 2006

I truly loathe Daylight Saving Time. My father told a story of how when he was finishing up his oral exams for his law degree at Duke (he graduated with Richard Nixon and until the day Nixon resigned, my father couldn't swallow the possibility of Tricky Dick's wrong-doing) they made my father give an extemporaneous speech on the whole business of Daylight Saving Time, and he spent the time trouncing Benjamin Franklin, chalking it up to the fact that the old boy had a bad case of syphilis and it had obviously gone to his brain. Instead of this annual exercise in disorientation, I vote that we have *DayLife* Savings Time and on the last Sunday of October we get to turn our life back one year and then on the first Sunday of April, we have to play catch up and turn our lives ahead one year. This ought to be a platform issue in every re-election campaign, don't you think? Abolition of the hated Daylight Savings Time would get somebody resoundingly elected, at least in my world.

In the interim, I have a problem. I am dealing with a stalker. It's sad, really. He's not very tall and never says anything. He sneaks into the house and eats the dog food and then sneaks back out. I've tried catching him in the act to no avail. I just am not able to deal with this fellow who seems to think he belongs here. He's orange and white, about nine inches tall, and weighs about twelve pounds and isn't afraid of anything except the dogs, who have decided we most certainly do NOT need another cat. Any ideas on how to send him on a kitty cruise to somewhere would be appreciated. The merecat seems to be well acquainted with him, if you get my drift.

It's been cold, and fires every night mean I'm splitting wood again (love that little red wood splitter I bought!) and when I was out gathering logs I saw some bear scat by the woodpile. The bears will be hard pressed this year when they get to the hyperphagia stage because there are NO apples, no nothing. So at night, I've been careful to get the dogs and the cat inside before it's been too dark for too long.

But one night, I called and called, "Mere...Mere.....Mere kitty" and no reply, no cat. Usually by the third call she's trotting in the door, like it was her idea in the first place. During a very long night, indeed, I got up every

couple of hours and called for her and called for her. And then I had this sinking feeling. Just that afternoon I had looked the Orange Stalker in the eye and told him to go away and that we didn't want him around here, and to just leave. I wondered if perhaps he had somehow convinced Mere to elope with him, or if he was truly evil, had sacrificed her to the bear.

Then in the morning I was really bereft. This cat has been remarkable in keeping evil out of my life since the moment I found her as a kitten w-a-a-y up in the tree in the front of the house, with no idea in the world of how she got there. I would miss her terribly. I was on the verge of falling into a pit of grief. But then I saw her---in the CAR! I have no idea how she got locked in there, no windows open, no sun roof open. I always keep blankets in the car, so she wasn't too cold, but boy was she MAD; the car is soundproof so I couldn't hear her even when I walked up to the window to let her out. She had tried all sorts of things to get my attention, evidently. She turned on the windshield wipers, she turned on the turn signal, she flipped on the high beams, but I guess she just couldn't figure out how to turn on the lights or she would have succeeded in her mission! I felt so glad she hadn't been eaten by the bear, and so glad she hadn't run off to the Poconos or the Catskills with the Orange Fellow, I gave her a whole can of tuna fish. And a quick lesson in how to turn on the lights.


Continuing in the wildlife report, the other night I heard a terrible racket on the front porch when Henry bolted out the door and engaged in hysterical alarm-barking. I grabbed a flashlight and encountered a HUGE raccoon. And another one trapped in the skunk trap. At least I hoped it was a raccoon and not a skunk when I lifted the trap door to let it out. This must be fated to be one of those winters like in *Rabbit Hill*, where St. Francis manifests in some new way every day, and I need to put up a sign in the driveway (like in *Rabbit Hill*), "Go slow on account of small animals." Maybe I'll cancel the 'Monback Brothers garbage service and just put the garbage out at night for the critters. Or maybe I'll enlist one of the large groups of men in camo outfits roaming the aisles of City Market and Wally World asking questions like, "Hey, bubba, we otto get some these Poptarts, hey?" and let them deal with it.



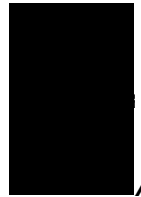
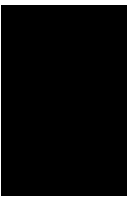
In the reading world I have been very busy. I romped through Bill Bryson's newest book, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid: A Memoir*, a chronicle of his childhood in Des Moines in the fifties which

probably accounts for why he moved to England and stayed there for twenty years (Broadway Books, ISBN 076791936X \$25). If you're ready for laughs and remembrances as well as a raftful of memorable characters and precious turns of phrase that I wish I had thought of, this is well worth the time. Bryson is one of the few authors I reread from time to time. His rich vocabulary and wonderfully cockeyed sense of humor makes me feel like we were separated at birth.

I am putting off buying and reading the last of the Lemony Snicket books because I am so fond of the series and just don't want it to end. I was also similiary discomfited that the Lady Grace Cavendish series is ending (after only six books); so much for medieval Nancy Drew, I suppose.

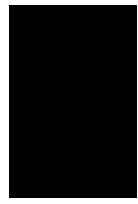


The last in the series, *Feud* (Random House Kids, ISBN 03850733232, \$7.95) is a great one. This series will be missed terribly. It also dovetailed with *A PickPocket's Tale* by Karen Schwabach (Random House, ISBN 037583379x, \$15.95) which had glowing jacket blurbs by two of my favorite authors—Karen Cushman and Donna Jo Napoli—and is a great story of a girl-child-pickpocket who gets deported to America in 1730 after being convicted. So it's kind of like Cushman's *Midwife's Apprentice* crossed with several of Napoli's books about exiled kids.



A Dog for Life by L.S. Matthews (Delacorte, ISBN 0385733666) is a perfect hero journey with a boy, a dog, and a just-right number of encounters with adversity on the way while John and Mouse (the dog) quest for a solution to an insoluble problem: his brother, Tom, is in chemo and might die. The dog must go. And so the dog AND the boy go in quest of a long lost uncle and find a rich family secret that is quite satisfying to the reader, no matter your age. I also seem to have latched onto a number of books about kids being shipped off to grandmothers' for the summer, an

odd coincidence at the very least.



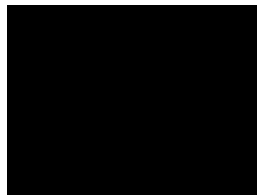
In *The Book of One Hundred Truths* (Delacorte, ISBN 0385732902) Thea's summer sojourn at her seaside grandma's is quite crowded with a variety of cousins, and one in particular whose curiosity forces Thea to come to terms with a terrible tragedy she has been keeping secret, which is revealed in her writing in a journal (at the request of her mother) "just a couple of true things each day" to counteract Thea's lying. It's a well structured read, and just as wonderful as Schumacher's *Grass Angel* which I previously raved about, I do believe.



Then there is *Nicky Deuce: Welcome to the Family* by Steven R. Schirripa and Charles Fleming (Delacorte, ISBN 0385732570) in which preppie Nicholas becomes "goomba" Nicky Deuce in a kind of "mini-Sopranos" romp through Brooklyn, and his grandmother's world.



On the weird and wild side, I loved *Bunnacula Meets Edgar Allen Crow* by James Howe. Bunnacula, the series, kind of ended about seven years ago, and I had totally forgotten how delightfully crafted the narratives of the vampire bunny, his dog buddies, Harold and Howie, and Chester the paranoid overimaginative cat can be. When I grow up I want to write books as funny and fun to read as this one!



I'm not quite sure how to describe *The Monstrous Memoirs of a Mighty McFearless* by Ahmet Zappa (yes, that Zappa) which is an odd mix of Gothic mystery, adventure and illustrated delight. It would be a great gift for a kid who's not turned on to reading, and needs to be!

Great illustrations, elegant layers of danger, and lots of action.

I ought to be writing a series about Mancos, and mysteries at the Center of the Known Universe, but haven't quite gotten to it. Instead, I've been working on publishing *A Little Book of Mancos Christmas Stories* for which Jean Talafus has done a wonderful cover. It should be ready (at the rate I'm going) by December 25. I'll send you another email as soon as it's done.



If you're hankering for a great Christmas book in the meantime, I think you need to look at Tomie de Paola's *Christmas Remembered* which will inspire your family to gather around and share memories that will truly bring Christmas back into your heart. It's \$19.99, and likely to change your Christmas outlook forever, I think. It's not a "regular" book for kids, but for the kids in all of us who want so very much for Christmas to cease being a merchandising opportunity. And of course, stories are what the universe is made of. Or that's what I teach people.

I've taught my children's book course twice at Fort Lewis this fall and enjoyed it immeasurably. One of the great propinquities was meeting with Lori Preusch, whose line of cards with rich lush artwork begging for stories to be written about them can be seen on her website at www.dandelionpress.com. They are available locally at Magpie's and Maria's in Durango. She is hoping to encourage writers to blend her pictures with their stories to develop a line of storycards soon, so if you're feeling frustrated as a writer looking for a topic, please do buy a pack of cards or check out her website. But remember...I have dibs on the picture of the little white pony tied to the stockings hanging by the Chimney, obviously left by Santa for the deserving little girl standing surrounded by surprise in this image. I think I like this picture best because when I was little, I was convinced that I was dropped down the wrong chimney.

In 1600-something or other, Descartes declared that all of God's world could be reduced to number, and do you know where he GOT that insight? From a dream in which an angel told it to him. So much for the left brain origins of science. I just want to remind you in the cold lonely light of scientific undaylight saving time that there is magic and mystery in the world, and that the universe (as Muriel Rukeyser says) is made not of atoms but STORIES.

So the stories I am working on include the answer to some of life's mysteries:

- In the family of things, what is our place in this loose tribe?
- What if, in this world, in your family, each child was born with an expiration date, and that information was given to the parents. Would you tell the child? What if you did? What if you didn't?
- How are we supposed to deal with people whose straw does not go all the way to the bottom of their milkshake?
- Why is it you never see TWO shoes by the side of the road, only one?
- Why exactly is it that enormously fat women get tattoos?

These, and many other questions I am certain you never ever wanted to know the answers to may show up in future Raccoons. Meanwhile, thanks for reading, thanks for writing, and thanks for being a part of the six years since the Cosmic Raccoon began publication! I'm still working on the compilation volume, and will let you know when it's REALLY done.

gwynne