First Opinion: Homework Stories—Martin MacGregor and the Quest to Complete Homework on Time


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*Peanut Butter and Homework Sandwiches*, written by second-grade teacher Lisa Broadie Cook and illustrated by Jack E. Davis, is a realistic fiction picture book that centers on one young boy’s problems turning in his homework during the course of a school week. The trouble begins when Martin MacGregor discovers on Monday that Mr. Elliott, “the coolest teacher ever,” has been temporarily replaced by a substitute teacher aptly named Mrs. Payne. Similar in content and artistic style to David Shannon’s *David Goes to School*, the book’s vivid colors, exaggerated drawings, and humorous storyline should delight young readers. On the cover of the book and within its pages, Mrs. Payne, wearing flamboyantly patterned dresses, green spectacles, and a beehive hairdo larger than many of the children, looms over the students in both her physical stature and her demeanor. While her appearance indicates that she might be a fun and whimsical person, her reactions to Martin’s failure to turn in his homework on time indicate that she is stern and uncompromising.
Told in third person but clearly from the perspective of Martin, the plot itself is fairly predictable but engaging. The central conflict is established on the first pages when Martin discovers, to his dismay, that Mrs. Payne likes to assign a great deal of homework and accepts “absolutely no excuses” for not turning it in on time. Each evening at home, Martin dutifully completes his assignments, but some kind of disaster occurs each day that prevents him from turning it in. As a result, Martin must re-do his homework at school and receives additional punishments, such as having to write “I will do my homework neatly” repeatedly, missing kickball at recess, and being forced to sit next to Samuel Hall, “the taker of everyone’s dessert,” at lunch. Reading the book the first time, I enjoyed trying to predict what humorous predicament would befall Martin next. On Monday, Martin drips peanut butter and jelly on his homework, causing his dog Sadie to eat it. On Tuesday, Martin’s mother washes his homework along with his jeans. Martin takes his sister’s backpack to school by mistake on Thursday morning, and the wind blows two of his papers onto the roof of the school on Friday. Martin’s problems appear to be resolved the following week when Mr. Elliott returns.

Cook’s playful language throughout the book contributes to its humorous tone and further engages the reader in the story. A sharp contrast between the book’s two teachers is created on the first pages with a pun, as the reader and Martin learn that whereas Mr. Elliot “had broken his arm mountain climbing…Mrs. Payne loved to give mountains of homework.” That afternoon, peanut butter and jelly are “slopped” onto a sandwich, “ooze” out of the bread, and “splat!” onto Martin’s paper. On Friday, when the wind blows away Martin’s homework, two of his papers do “loopy loops in the sky before landing on the roof of the school.”

While most readers will easily relate to the situations described in the book, the defining message, at times, feels blurry. The majority of the book focuses on seemingly unavoidable catastrophes that leave Martin unprepared for school the following day. However, the book opens and closes with images of Martin excited to meet and learn about Mr. Elliott’s pet tarantula, Harriett. A secondary conflict that occurs during the week is that Martin doesn’t like the type of work that Mrs. Payne assigns, like spelling and definitions, which Martin finds “boring.” To help Martin feel better, his father suggests that he “think up [his] own homework” to complete after finishing what has been assigned, offering to let Martin use his computer for research. Excited about this activity, Martin spends one evening looking up facts about tarantulas, putting pictures of tarantulas in his room, and making tarantulas out of food and other objects around his house, including his dog Sadie. The book closes with Mr. Elliott telling the students to research tarantulas; the student who finds the most facts will get to care for Harriett for a week. Martin is happy not because he’s learned to deal with the exigencies of life, such as unavoidable accidents and stern substitute teachers, but simply because his favorite teacher has returned with
an activity that Martin wants to do. Most children are not likely to be bothered by this blending of several different issues, and will enjoy discussing Martin's various dilemmas and how they might be resolved.

Work Cited


About the Author

Cheryl Taliaferro has been a language arts teacher at Selwyn College Preparatory School in Denton, Texas, for fifteen years. She received her Ph.D. in Reading from the University of North Texas, where she has taught teacher education courses that focus on children's literature.