First Opinion: *Boy or Beast?*


*Donna R. White*

The subtitle of Bob Balaban’s humorous novel, *The Creature from the Seventh Grade: Boy or Beast*, captures the confusion of a pubescent boy no longer certain of his identity. Puberty is difficult at the best of times, but for Charlie Drinkwater it triggers a recessive mutant dinosaur gene passed on from his grandmother. In the middle of the school day, the seventh grader transforms from an undersized wimp into a green, scaly monster. Monstrous transformations have been a metaphor for puberty at least since R. L. Stine’s *Goosebumps* series in the 1990s, but Charlie’s changes are played for laughs rather than horror. He is suddenly too large, too green, and too awkward, and his tail seems to have a mind of its own.

The varying reactions to Charlie’s transformation are reminiscent of magical realism in that everyone, whether horrified or intrigued, accepts this impossible event as a natural development. Charlie’s parents take his transformation in stride, but his over-achieving older brother has trouble watching Charlie become the center of everyone’s attention at home and at school. Meanwhile, at school, Charlie wrestles with his provisional re-admittance (if he eats anyone, he will be permanently suspended), a bully who continues to make his life miserable, and his conflicting desires between accepting an invitation to join the cool kids and remaining true to his nerdy but socially unacceptable friends.
Charlie’s first-person, present-tense account of his experiences is breezy, intelligent, and funny. His voice is that of an authentic seventh grader, beset by the usual insecurities and self-doubts. However, he and his two best friends seem like stereotypical over-achievers, and some of the other school kids represent even more obvious stereotypes: the bully, the popular girl, the class clown, the mean girl. The stereotypes do not interfere with the entertainment value of the story, but they probably do disqualify the book for any kind of literary recognition.

Bob Balaban’s experience as an actor, director, and producer informs the dialogue, characterization, and pacing of the story, which is almost as much a screenplay as a novel. No doubt the story will soon be an ABC Family movie. The blurbs on the back of the book were written by movie stars rather than children’s literature reviewers. However, the book is well written and amusing and should appeal to fans of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

The visual aspects of the book are appealing. For instance, Andy Rash’s occasional illustrations are humorous cartoons that suit the tone and events of the story. One picture features Charlie as class runt forced to play football, standing helplessly between two hulking linebackers with Neanderthal brows. Once Charlie becomes a dinosaur, the pictures show him as more active, but still in awkward situations.

The book design is even more appealing than the illustrations. At times I found myself noticing the design almost more than the story, but I suspect that may be because I’ve spent so much time with my Kindle recently. Apparently I have really missed professional book design, so I appreciated the creative type fonts and the dripping gray blobs (blood? creature goo?) in the background of the first page of each chapter. The copyright page obligingly informs me that Jim Hoover is responsible for these elements as well as for the student planner doodles featured at the beginning of several chapters. Even the page numbers fit the design: they, too, are dripping an unknown substance.

Despite the stereotypical characters and a contrived plot, the story is enjoyable thanks to the witty dialogue and silly situations. By the end of the book, Charlie learns predictable lessons: popularity is not as appealing as he thought it would be, he is capable of standing up to a bully, true friends are more important than popularity, and family members always stick together. Truthfully, the last lesson is aimed at Charlie’s brother Dave, but it’s still an obvious theme.

**About the Author**

*Donna R. White* is a professor of English at Arkansas Tech University where she teaches young adult literature, science fiction and fantasy, and graphic novels. She is the author of *A Century of Welsh Myth in Children’s Literature* and *Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. LeGuin and the Critics* and coeditor of three collections of scholarly articles.