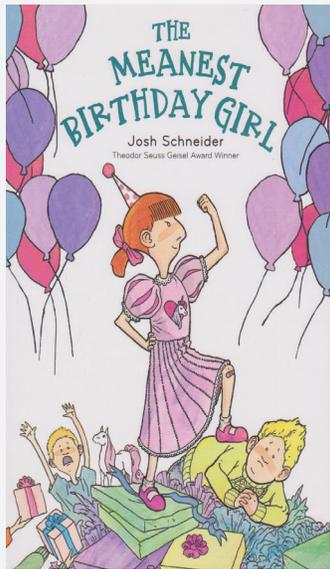


## First Opinion: Naughty or Nice? Didacticism and Humor in Josh Schneider's *The Meanest Birthday Girl*

Schneider, Josh. *The Meanest Birthday Girl*. Boston: Clarion Books, 2013.

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Published in May 2013, Josh Schneider's illustrated book *The Meanest Birthday Girl* is suitable for early chapter book readers. It tells the tale of Dana, a school-age girl who views her birthday as a day when "she could do whatever she liked" (8). At first glance, there seems to be nothing askew with Dana's birthday desire to dress in her favorite birthday dress and eat her favorite birthday breakfast. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that Dana's impulse to fulfill every whim goes beyond pleasing herself and instead includes hurting others. Specifically, she abuses her schoolmate, Anthony, pinching him and stealing his dessert at lunch.

Dana is not an entirely sympathetic protagonist. One gets the sense that her negative actions are not merely the result of momentary birthday self-indulgence, but really part of a larger pattern of behavior. For instance, the narrator remarks that Dana "liked to call Anthony names" (8) and "also liked to pinch" (9), suggesting that this is not the first time Dana has abused her peers.

Schneider's illustrations are colorful and humorous, yet they further underscore Dana's negative traits. For instance, she is shown reaching for Anthony's dessert while she clearly has a mouth full of her own dessert and still holds a half-eaten cupcake in her hand. We learn

that at school, she “showed off her favorite birthday dress to all her friends” (10), and the accompanying illustration depicts a look of conceit on Dana’s face.

These negative aspects of Dana’s character establish her as a child who is perfectly placed to learn a lesson or two about kindness, sacrifice, and selflessness. This lesson is delivered in the form of a surprise birthday gift from Anthony. Dana’s surprise at receiving a gift is rooted in her own awareness of her unacceptable and unkind behavior, “for Dana would not have given a birthday present to someone who . . . pinched her and ate the dessert out of her lunch” (18). Anthony’s gift, however, which is “a big white elephant,” is not given solely out of a spirit of generosity. Rather, it is a didactic tool that teaches Dana some valuable lessons.

Dana “knew how important it is to take good care of one’s pets” (19), and her love for the elephant leads her to sacrifice her own comforts in order to protect it. She gives up her bed to the elephant, goes hungry so that it can have enough food to eat, and even lets it crush her bicycle because it wants to try riding it.

Up until this point in the story, Schneider seems to be following the pattern of classic didactic children’s literature. His selfish child protagonist learns, through her love for a fellow creature, to become selfless. Yet the story is not as straightforward as it may first appear, which is what makes it an enjoyable read. The narrative does not end with Dana learning to take care of her new pet and being happy with her newfound sense of responsibility and compassion. Rather, being distracted by the efforts to look after her elephant causes Dana to become an easy target of bullying by her schoolmate Gertrude, who calls Dana names and throws mud at her. Eventually, exasperated by Gertrude and worn out with the effort to take care of her elephant, which “was such hard work” (41), Dana devises a plan. Mirroring Anthony’s earlier actions, she gives the elephant to Gertrude as a birthday present.

The final illustrations show Gertrude feeding the elephant her prized piece of birthday cake, and Dana marching off with a satisfied, possibly even smug, look on her face. Schneider’s text and illustrations complicate the didactic message of the story. Has Dana really learned to change her behavior? Is she presenting the elephant to Gertrude in an effort to be generous and kind, or is this merely for her own self-preservation? Having learned her lesson and experienced bullying firsthand, is Dana now taking on the responsibility of teaching her peer the same message about how to treat others? The illustrations and text are open to interpretation, and the story is all the more enjoyable for its ambiguity, which helps the moral lesson avoid being too heavy-handed. Schneider’s use of humor softens the didactic message of the text, making it enjoyable for the young reader who, like Dana, may remain a little bit naughty after reading the story, but who may learn to be just a little bit nicer too.

### **About the Author**

**Elizabeth Galway** is an associate professor of English at the University of Lethbridge, where she teaches courses in children's literature, Canadian literature, and the nineteenth century. She is the author of *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children's Literature and the Construction of Canadian Identity* (Routledge 2008) and is currently completing a SSHRC-funded monograph on children's literature of World War I.