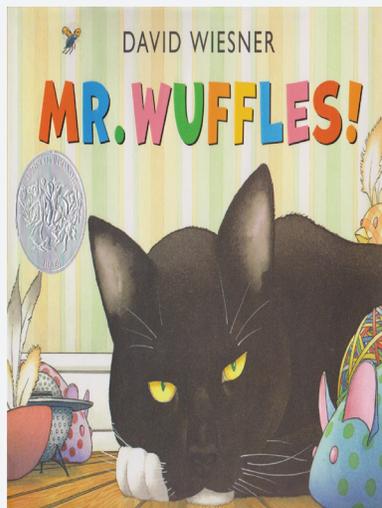


First Opinion: Overcoming the Monster: David and Goliath, Beowulf, and Mr. Wuffles?

Wiesner, David. *Mr. Wuffles!* New York: Clarion Books, 2013.

Ashley Wolff



Cats are scary.

They slink and pounce and lie in wait.

Their sharp teeth, and sharp claws, and eerily-silent ability to cross a room are unnerving. Luckily, I am bigger than the average house cat. If I were a ladybug, or heaven forbid, a slender green space alien, I'd be petrified.

Mr. Wuffles!, written and illustrated by David Wiesner, is about such a cat.

Gazing out at us from the book cover is Mr. Wuffles. He is handsome, sturdy, and wears a black and white tuxedo to go with his sleepy, lemon-colored eyes. If my book's paper dust jacket had not been slightly torn, I may not have looked beneath at the hardback. Gone is the polished oak floor, the lineup of cat toys, and the painted baseboard. Instead we are floating out in the Milky Way. Despite the lack of gravity I immediately felt at home—in a new, David Wiesner world, where the mundane and the fantastic are seamlessly integrated.

Mild gray endpapers turn to reveal an opening, two-panel page. Mr. Wuffles rejects a perfectly nice goldfish toy and his human sighs, "Oh, Mr. Wuffles!" in a smooth, oval speech balloon (unpaged). Humans never say much in Wiesner's books. They represent the baffled observers, the mostly passive witnesses and real world foils to the fantastic goings-on in the worlds around them.

In his signature, meticulous, watercolor and India ink renderings, Wiesner composes comic panels, securely bordered in solid black, and keeps the viewpoint low and tight. We follow Mr. Wuffles across the copyright and title page as he patrols his domain. Among the ignored toys, sitting between a rubber band bundle and a stuffed pig, we spy a ping-pong ball-sized object, looking a bit like two vegetable steamers clamped together. Wiesner zooms us through a long, horizontal slit into this silvery sphere and we realize we're in the command module of a toy-scale spaceship.

A crew of five, big-eyed aliens are celebrating a successful landing and packing up, ready to explore this new environment. Crisp, rectangular speech balloons enclose their conversation, written in a language of geometric symbols, often arranged like compound equations with a numerator and denominator. But suddenly, those lemony, feline eyes appear in the slit, and the trouble begins.

In so many epic adventure tales from literature, the small and weak are pitted against the giant and mighty. In *Mr. Wuffles!*, the slender green alien crew, in floor-length robes, is menaced by the Mighty Wuffles. But they are not alone. Fleeing to safety beneath the radiator they meet a valiant crew of ants and a ladybug. Unlike the space visitors, these insects communicate with brushy dash-marks inside cloudlike speech balloons. Somehow, using the power of visual narrative and the universal language of "Cheese," the two groups manage to bond.

As in Wiesner's surreal and inventive *The Three Pigs*, when the weak combine teamwork with invention, they can prevail over the mighty. Using advanced space tools and the random, dusty objects found under couch cushions and behind furniture, the newly-formed team gets to work. Broken power discs are replaced with circular slices from a glass marble, pencil eraser, metal screw, and candy-coated chocolate.

Throughout the book, the playful page design alternates dramatic, full-bleed images of Mr. Wuffles drawn at life size or larger with pages crammed with horizontal comic panels. Wiesner uses shifts in scale and point of view to contrast the domestic setting with close-ups of the final battle and escape. Transportation by spaceship and willing ladybug lets Wiesner include a beloved flying scene, familiar from *Tuesday* and *The Three Pigs*. Mr. Wuffles is all frenzied eyes and claws and teeth, chasing the ship until it finally lifts up and out of the window. In a spiky speech balloon, he utters his singular cry of the book: "MROWW!"

David Wiesner's books reveal some of the treasures piled in his imagination. My favorite spread in *Mr. Wuffles!* shows the alien survivors using light-sticks to reveal a wall of terrifying drawings, documenting the history of battles with Mighty Wuffles. Leaning nearby are the tools used by the ant and ladybug artists: burnt match sticks and a scrap of red crayon.

Lucky for us, Wiesner has just the right tools to make books with beautiful surfaces and fascinating concepts, and we needn't squeeze under the radiator to see them.

Works Cited

Wiesner, David. *Mr. Wuffles!*. New York: Clarion Books, 2013. Print.

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About the Author

Ashley Wolff has been a visual artist since she declared herself one at the age of five. She grew up in Middlebury, Vermont and holds a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design. Wolff is the author and/or illustrator of over 60 children's picture books, including *Baby Bear Sees Blue*, *Stella and Roy Go Camping*, *Baby Beluga*, and the beloved *Miss Bindergarten Series*. Every summer, Wolff teaches writing and media studies in the MFA program in children's picture book writing and illustration at Hollins University. For 30 years, one of Wolff's favorite pastimes has been traveling to schools all over the US, speaking to children about writing, drawing, and using their imagination to help them find their paths to the future. She lives and works in San Francisco, California and Leicester, Vermont.