

Story Monsters Ink

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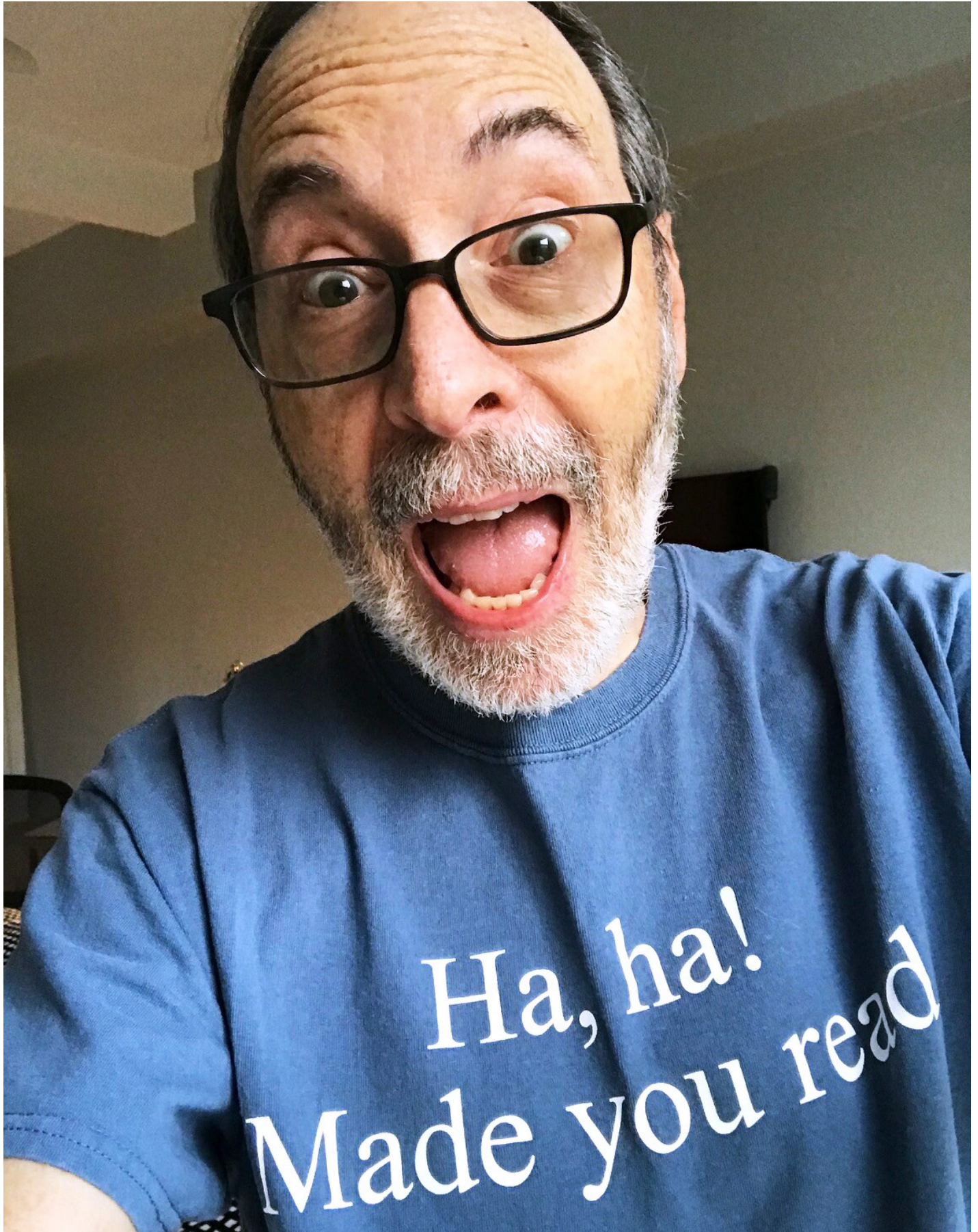
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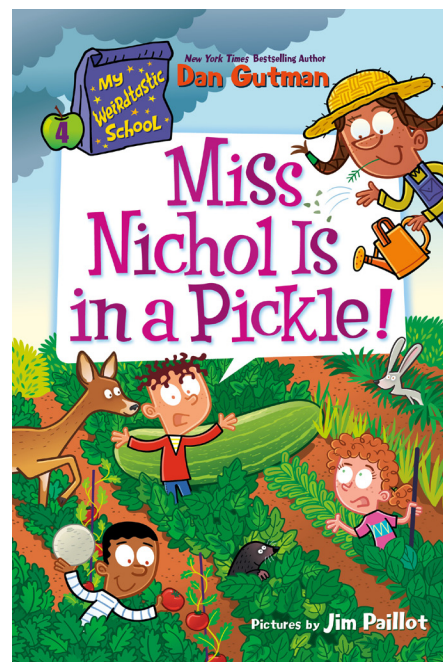
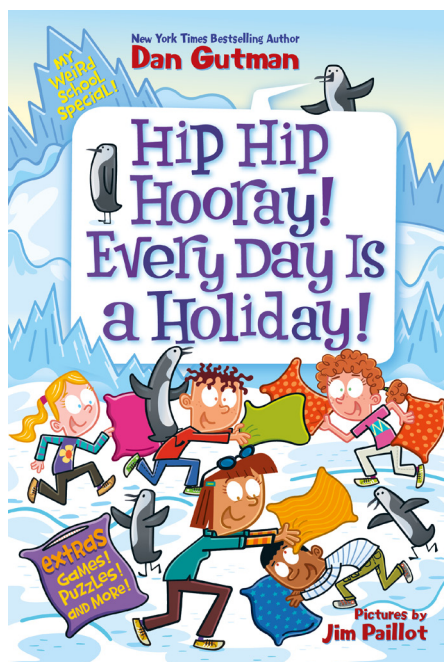
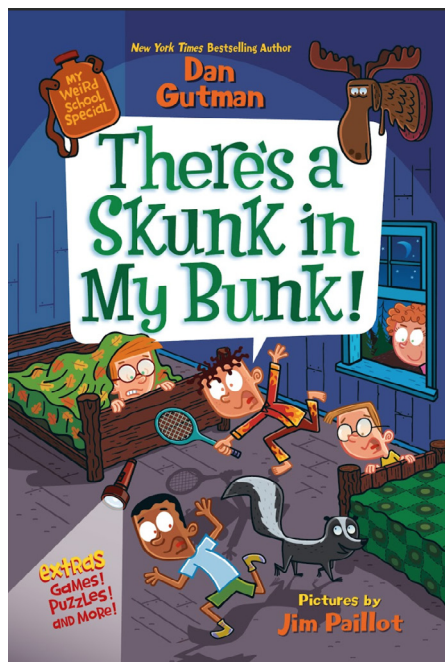
Dan Gutman

Is Up to More Weird School Shenanigans

by Raven Howell

Bestselling author Dan Gutman has written 185 books for young readers, including the *My Weird School* series, the *Baseball Card Adventure* series, and the *Genius Files*. The *School Library Journal* distinguished him “an expert at merging humor with history.” Dan’s work covers a wide variety of themes such as sports and science.





By the end of this year, his *My Weird School* book series (published by HarperCollins) will include over 100 titles, with more than 35 million copies sold globally. And this June marks the series' 20th anniversary.

As a prolific author, one would think he writes like mad, dawn to dusk, daily. On the contrary, he says. "Never. I have author friends who will spend the whole day writing or write all night. Not me. As the only employee of a small business, I have lots of other stuff besides writing that I need to do." Some of that "other stuff" includes promotion, answering emails, research, and billing. Some days may also include KitKats, ice cream, "or milk chocolate anything, really" ... his guilty pleasures.

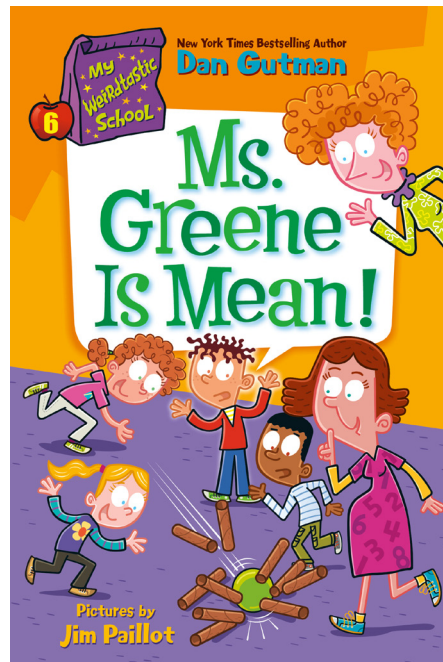
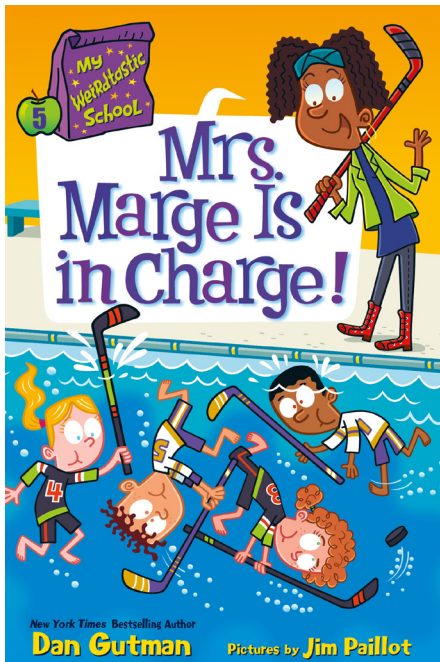
When he's working on a book, Dan prefers a quiet atmosphere. "I usually wake up around 7 a.m. I'm a morning person, and that's when I do my writing. I can only focus my attention for a few hours a day. By lunchtime, my brain is kind of shot. But I write pretty fast. It takes about a month to write a *My Weird School* book."

"I have lots of writing spaces," he says. "I use a laptop computer, and I like to work for an hour in my home office, then an hour in the park across the street, then an hour in the library, and so on. It hurts my butt to sit in one place for a long period of time!"

Nevertheless, the pain in his backside is worth it, and he says, "Without books and reading, we'd all be a bunch of uninformed dopes. And goodness knows we have more than enough uninformed dopes as it is!"

History intrigues him. "I never took any history classes in college, but after I graduated, I realized I was fascinated by it. A lot of my books (other than *My Weird School*) are stories that take place in different time periods, and I like to blend fact and fiction together to write historical fiction."

Back in 1980, Dan wrote humor essays for New York City area newspapers and then created a successful video games magazine. He was a freelance writer for outlets including *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, *Writer's Digest*, and *USA Today*, and published a few sports books for adults. Then Dan published his first non-fiction children's book about sports, and in 1994, began writing fiction for kids. He always wanted to write humor and says children will often tell him that his books make them laugh. He's great at conjuring zany, hilarious scenarios in page-turning storylines. So does the author himself ever chuckle while writing the stories? "Hardly ever!" he exclaims. "The only time I remember laughing was when I thought of having A.J. and his friends burst into the gym like cops while the teachers were exercising and having the kids shout, 'Freeze, dirtbags!' I've used that line in several of the books."



Comedically struggling to describe himself in two simple sentences, he responds, “That’s a hard one. Oh, did I just use one of my two sentences? I’m a very regular guy who likes to keep things simple. I’m an overgrown kid in the body of an adult man.”

Dan feels persistence was the trait that helped him the most in his career. A good thing too because his path to success has been long and winding. A major pivotal moment along the way was “deciding to drop out of graduate school, move to New York City, and pursue a career as a writer. I was in a doctoral program in psychology, and I hated every minute of it. Leaving that was the smartest decision I ever made.”

He’s modest about his bestselling author status. “I was only No. 1 on the bestseller list for four weeks in 2011 (for *The Genius Files: Mission Unstoppable*), but with those words on the cover of all my books, it looks like I’m a huge success.” He’s amused. “Ha! What a scam,” he jovially proclaims. This, coming from an author who has received 19 state book awards and 92 state book award nominations, awards in ALA Popular Paperbacks, ALA Best Books, a JLG Selection, the Bank Street Best, Booklist Editors’ Choice, and the National Green Earth Book Award Honor. But okay.

Miss Daisy Is Crazy, published in 2004, was the very first book in his popular *My Weird School* series. “I’d like to think my writing has gotten better. With experience and practice,

we should get better at anything we do, right?” In regard to working on a story, Dan says, “Writing the middle is the most challenging. The beginning and the ending usually come easily, but sometimes I struggle making the middle chapters fit together.”

“Even more than humor, I think it’s most important for the writing to flow. Each sentence has to flow naturally to the next one. Each paragraph, the same. Each chapter should be a little standalone story of its own, and end in a way to make the reader want to read the next chapter. I think that if a kid has to read a sentence, paragraph, or chapter twice to understand what’s going on, the author has failed. I like to read stories that flow smoothly, so I figure that’s the way I should write.”

One new story took a bit of urging. “For years, I had the idea of writing something about the theft of the Mona Lisa from the Louvre Museum in Paris in 1911. But I couldn’t come up with a story that I thought kids would get into. I don’t remember how I figured it out, but the solution suddenly came to me. The resulting book, *The Picasso Curse*, will come out next year from Holiday House.”

Presently, *Miss Nichol Is in a Pickle* is celebrating its 100th book status in the series. “Miss Nichol is a graduate student who comes to Ella Mentry School to help the kids make a vegetable garden behind the school,” explains Dan. “As in all the *My*

Weird School books, I ask myself, “What could possibly go wrong?” The story comes out of that.”

With a prompt to pick a character from the book he would choose to be for a week, he says, “Mrs. Stoker, the principal of Ella Mentry School. Before she was principal, she was a stand-up comedian, so she’s always cracking jokes. I’m not a joke-teller myself, but I always wished I was.”

“I don’t really imagine what the scenes or characters are going to look like,” he says about the artwork. “I just write the story, send it to Jim (Paillot, the illustrator), and he chooses which parts to illustrate and what to draw. He is terrific. People are always surprised to hear that Jim and I have worked on over 100 books now, and we’ve only met once in person.”

“I honestly love all of the book covers. I’m astonished at how Jim is able to make every *My Weird School* cover different, and at the same time each one is instantly identifiable as a *My Weird School* book.”

Also new from Dan is *The (Mostly) True Story of Cleopatra’s Needle* for ages 8-12 (published by Holiday House). “I live across the street from Central Park in New York City, and I often ride my bike around the six-mile loop in the park. On every lap, I would ride by this huge obelisk that’s standing behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It’s seven stories high, and it weighs over 220 tons. I found out that it was carved 3,500 years ago in Egypt, and began to wonder how it got to America. The more I researched it, the more fascinating the story became. I decided to tell the story in diary form by five fictional kids who played a role in its history.”

“One man, Henry Gorringer, almost single-handedly is responsible for bringing Cleopatra’s Needle from Egypt to New York. And he did it in 1880, when he didn’t have the use of cars, trucks, cranes, or computers. It was an amazing accomplishment, and it’s interesting to me that hardly anybody ever heard of him or what he did.”

“Sometimes kids ask, ‘If you could write any book, what would you write?’ I tell them I can write any book. That’s the beauty of being a freelancer. Nobody tells me what to do. So if a subject interests me (Cleopatra’s Needle, the Mona Lisa, history, baseball, Harry Houdini, technology, etc.), I can write about it.”

Dan visits about 70 schools a year (all virtually) and also libraries, bookstores, and book festivals. “I post on social media about any upcoming appearances in advance,” he adds.



When addressing young audiences, he fields lots of questions from curious readers. They often ask, “What’s your favorite of your books? (*Johnny Hangtime*). How long does it take to write a book? (anywhere from a few weeks to a year). How old are you? (68). How much money do you make? (none of your business).”

For the near future, expect “*My Weird School* will continue with *Ms. Greene Is Mean!*, *Mr. and Mrs. Phelps Need Some Help!*, *Mr. Plummer Is Dumber!*, *Miss Sherman Is Determined!*, and specials about poetry and holidays (I work several books ahead).”

Dan is also perfecting his Pickleball, “a game I took up about a year ago and I’m totally addicted to” and enjoying his favorite food (watermelon) when he has the opportunity. His joy of family remains a priority. “To me, happiness means having a wonderful wife and kids, a career that’s fulfilling, and having other interests (to prevent me from just working all the time).”

“It’s a cliché that if you work hard enough there’s no limit to what you can accomplish. It’s also true. It’s also true that success isn’t handed to anybody. You’ve got to go after it. And I can make up for my lack of talent by working harder than everybody else,” he says cheerily.

For more information about Dan Gutman and his books, visit dangutman.com. ●