



The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis

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Nothing ever happens in Fayette, South Carolina. That's what Popeye thinks, anyway. His whole life, everything has just been boring, boring, boring. But things start to look up when the Jewells' Holiday Rambler makes a wrong turn and gets stuck in the mud, trapping Elvis and his five rowdy siblings in Fayette for who knows how long. Popeye has never met anyone like Elvis Jewell. He's so good at swearing he makes Uncle Dooley look like a harp-strumming angel, and he says "So what?" like he really means it. Then something curious comes floating down the creek—a series of boats with secret messages—and it sends Popeye and Elvis into the big world on the hunt for a small adventure.

With a healthy helping of humor and the signature Southern charm that has captivated children and critics alike, Barbara O'Connor's newest tale is a heartwarming look at the joy that can come out of being a Royal Rule Breaker, and learning to find one's own adventures.

The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis Details

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From Reader Review The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis for online ebook

Grace Lin says

From the size of the actual book (it's just a bit smaller than standard, perfect for smaller hands) to the characters to the storyline and vocabulary words this book is charming, charming, charming.

Betsy says

American children grow up reading so many good British novels that sometimes it's hard to conjure up similar books of a Yankee nature. Maybe that's why I like Barbara O'Connor so much. Fantasy fans are forever searching for the next great American fantasy novel, but I for one am forever on a search for the next great American realistic children's book. And certainly *The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis* probably owes more to The Adventures of Tom Sawyer than The Railway Children when you read its plot and cadences. Small and unassuming, O'Connor appears to be honing her craft with each book she writes. This latest is simply one of her best.

Boredom comes cheap in Fayette, South Carolina. If Popeye could sell it he'd be a rich boy by now. After all, there's very little to keep him interested this summer. Living with his grandmother and his dog, life doesn't really perk up until a Holiday Rambler filled to the brim with a loud, squabbling, exciting family gets stuck in a nearby mud patch. Popeye quickly befriends Elvis, a boy about his age, and the two decide that what they need is a small adventure. It's simply perfect that such an adventure presents itself to the two when boats made out of Yoo-Hoo cartons start sailing down the nearby creek carrying cryptic messages. Who's sending them? What do they mean? And will the boys be able to solve the mystery before Elvis's Rambler is removed from the mud at last?

How do you make a book about nothing interesting? It's sort of the quandary the TV show *Seinfeld* posed when the characters wanted to make their own television show about nothing. *Seinfeld* is about as far as you can get from *Popeye and Elvis* in terms of story and structure, but in both cases they deal with the everyday mundane aspects of our lives. The trick is to stay true to the material and yet still have enough story and character development to make it fun. Maybe Barbara O'Connor has this hidden burning need to write about space monsters and shiny vampires, but somehow I doubt it. At some point in her life she realized that she had a gift. She makes ordinary folks heroes in very human ways.

Ms. O'Connor has other gifts as well, mind you. For example, she is an exemplary example of economy in writing. I've always sort of believed that the less words you use, while still staying on point, the better writer you are (which makes these gigantic reviews I write all the more ironic, I guess). If you look at easy readers you realize that folks like Dr. Seuss and Arnold Lobel had a gift. Early chapter books are just as hard, in some ways. You can't spend pages and pages talking about motivation. Character and personality has to be shown, not told. Here's a brilliant example, with three characters introduced at once, with not a single word out of place:

"Popeye needed Velma to not crack up because no one else in his family was very good at taking care of things. Not his father, who lived up in Chattanooga and sold smoke-damaged rugs out of the back of a pickup truck. Not his mother, who came and went but never told anybody where she came from or where she

went to. And definitely not his uncle Dooley, who lived in a rusty trailer in the backyard and sometimes worked at the meatpacking plant and sometimes sold aluminum siding and sometimes watched TV all day."

She's the Bailey White of children's literature. She has a distinctive voice, which is so hard to find sometimes. Read enough children's books and they all start to run together in your brain. Not O'Connor. Whether she's defining the term *avuncular*, describing the interior of the *Holiday Rambler* ("Beside the booth was a tiny television, strapped to the wall with a bungee cord") or just adding in little human moments ("Elvis punched him in the arm with a knuckle") she just seems to know how to pick and choose her words. When I grow up, I want to write just like Barbara O'Connor.

Which brings me to yet another trademark O'Connorism: class. Her characters are people with real jobs who get by and don't have the option of just leaving all their troubles behind. Popeye lives with his grandmother and they make do, but it's in a pretty remote area. The kind of place where a stuck RV is going to be the biggest news going on in a long time. Previous O'Connor novels had similar characters and situations. *How to Steal a Dog* (one of my favorites) examined homelessness and, to a certain extent, how bad situations cause good people to make bad choices. *Greetings from Nowhere* (a big hit with the kids' bookgroup I run) involved motels and the people who both visit and run them. There's something nice about reading a Barbara O'Connor book and knowing that you're not going to have to deal with stereotypical tropes like "if this character lives in a trailer park, you know they're evil" and the like. Her folks don't have a lot of money. Neither do a lot of folks in the country right now. Makes sense.

Problems with this book? Dunno. I'm usually pretty good at coming up with some kind of an objection to any given title. But maybe too much time has passed between my reading this and my reviewing it. When I look at this book now I sort of view it through the blur of deep affection. It's got great lines like "Dead dogs live here", great characters portrayed with just the right amount of words, and a plot that's interesting in a small, simple way. It's funny not to find something to compare this to, but *The Small Adventure of Popeye and Elvis* really is its own unique little beast. An early chapter book that just works. I hope it gets the attention it deserves.

Ages 7-11.

Danielle says

My South Carolinian mother and I cracked up at a couple of things: "A Hogstinkin' sack of nothin'? That was a good an insult as Popey ahd heard in a long time. He made a mental note to remember it." and "I swear, if that husband of mine had an idea, it would die of lonliness." Certainly phrases to be remembered and used frequently. :)

All in all, super fun to listen to - not so much for the scope of the "adventure" (after all, it is only a small adventure) but the voice of our narrator Popeye is just so endearing and relatable.

Joe Bolin says

I just read this book aloud to my fourth grade class a second time (new class but the same age group) and it held up very well: still deserves all five stars! This time around, I added a new activity and picked up boxes

of Yoo-Hoo at Dollar Tree. The children drank the Yoo-Hoo while I read the last three chapters and then we made boats just like Starletta! A great way to start the school year.

Peg says

Barbara O'Connor knows how to tell a story about ordinary folks. Not much is happening in Popeye's NC town and it looks like a long boring summer stretching out before him. Enter Elvis and his family, whose silver rambler gets stuck in the mud outside Popeye's grandmother's house. Popeye envies Elvis' lifestyle and bravado, particularly since he takes to heart his grandmother's constant rants and raves.

The small adventure is truly small, but just right for a couple boys on summer vacation. There's a slight mystery as we travel the paths in the woods with these boys. The strength is the characterization, as we get to know Velma, Starletta, and most especially, Elvis.

Jeanette says

Barbara O'Connor how do I love thee? Let me count the ways. 1. Greetings from Nowhere 2. The Small Adventures of Popeye and Elvis. And, well, that is it because those are the only books I've read by you, yet. To me Barbara O'Connor has this ability to create amazing, vivid, really likable characters. And she puts those characters into settings that are just as wonderful and vivid to read about. But she does both these things without really writing a lot. Does that make sense? You know who these characters are through and through without being given a ton of back story and explanation. Who they are is conveyed through what they say and do and the setting they are placed in. In addition to this, both of the books I've read by O'Connor have just felt real and almost tangible. Now, there are 3 things that usually line up to make me love a piece of fiction. I love fiction with good characters, good settings; i.e a setting that is almost a character itself and fiction that is realistic. So, that means I have really become a fan of Ms. Barbara O'Connor.

I just loved this sweet story about Popeye and I will just say one more time, oh, the characters! The characters! The characters!

A great little story of adventure and friendship for every young person and plenty of not so young people too.

Kirby says

I don't know anyone who does a better job of leaving white space in a story than Barbara O'Connor. I study her books over and over to help me learn how to weave in backstory and to learn what to leave out. She says so much with spare, perfectly chosen words.

I loved this story of Popeye's "small" adventure and being immersed in his life. I admire the way we are set inside of homes that might be a little non-traditional but where you feel right at home. And I finished the book with a contented little sigh. . and the strong urge to go make a Yoo-Hoo boat.

Erin says

If you want to read a book aloud to your child, skip this one. Besides being mostly boring, I felt like the characters were pretty awful examples--they had a "spitting and swearing" club, Popeye was dishonest and disobedient several times to his Grandma (legal guardian) and then tried to think up sneaky excuses to justify his lie, Elvis' favorite phrase to adults and kids alike was "so what." With so many other great books out there, don't waste your time with this one.

Barb Middleton says

Barbara O'Connor has quite a gift with words. The cadence of the sentences using repetition, sounds, and great voice, hooked me into the story from page one. Interestingly, not much happens in this story and for an impatient reader like myself it says a lot when I can't put a realistic fiction book down because I'm so engrossed in the setting and character voices. Popeye makes a temporary friend with Elvis who lives in a mobile trailer with a family of eight that has become stuck in the mud by his house. Popeye lives with his overprotective Grandma Velma, and uncle that is in and out of jail. He is bored and wants an adventure. When he and Elvis find floating boats in the nearby creek with messages, they track down the writer of them.

At first I thought this would be a good read aloud because of the beautiful writing, but the content has name calling and adults swatting kids. It is a part of the book's humor, but I just had a 4th grader name-calling and hurting other students feelings in my library. As an educator, I don't want to reinforce bad behavior, but the reality of life is that people name-call and you have to deal with it. In this story the name-calling is a part of the humor such as when Elvis calls his brother "A toe-jam tattletale." When they form the Spit and Swear Club it reminded of the time my brothers taught me some swear words. The author captures Popeye's thrill at doing something he knows he shouldn't be doing quite well. "Then the boy let loose with a string of the most amazing and wonderful swearwords that ...made [Uncle] Dooley look like a harp-strumming angel." I like that the book is not didactic but it will require some discussion as a classroom read aloud.

The families are poor and live in South Carolina, although Popeye is not illiterate. Their accents have them complaining about the "dern rain" or exclaiming "What in the name of sweet Bernice in heaven is that?" or kids calling each other "hog-stinkin' sack of nothin'" Popeye gets a vocabulary word each week from Velma that is challenging. He applies it to his situations as he tries to determine right from wrong. After reading hundreds of books that use this technique of defining words to young readers, I find it has become cliched for me and annoying. It is well done so it might not bother you, but personally I am tired of the technique.

Popeye's character is one that just follows Elvis who has an attitude and prides himself in not caring what adults think of him. While Elvis bucks authority figures, Popeye finds this an entirely new experience as he disobeys Velma in his quest to find the floating boat-maker. Velma responds to Popeye's disobedience by just swatting him, versus talking about what he is doing. I kept waiting for some revelation at the end where Velma finally sits down and asks Popeye what was going on, but she never does. While her high vocabulary suggests she's smart, her actions show otherwise. Her disinterest, while realistic, left me wondering what the character arc of Popeye was throughout the novel. I think it is that he is no longer bored because he makes a friend with Scarletta.

A funny character trait that Velma has is that she recites the kings and queens of England so she won't "crack up." This play on words throughout the story adds terrific irony because Velma means that she doesn't want

to get dementia and lose her mind but her life situation is "cracked up" from her daughter and husband that abandoned their son Popeye for her to raise. Toss in Velma's irresponsible son, Dooley, that accidentally shot Popeye in the eye with a BB gun when he was three and that is in-and-out of trouble with the law, and the reader realizes most would be crazy dealing with all the troubles she has on her doorstep. A book that will make you "Yoo-hoo."

Paula says

Sweet. Sweet, and full of mud. That's a nice combination, kind of like T.R. Pearson for kids. Also, any book involving kids and a creek (at least one in which none of the kids drown - I am still not over Bridge to Terabithia) usually gets me breathing a little deeper. Know what I'm saying? No? Hm.

Popeye lives in a crappy old house that backs onto the woods in semi-rural Fayette, South Carolina. His parents are off somewhere and he is being raised by his overprotective grandma Velma. He is on the verge of possibly petrifying with boredom when an RV full of disheveled kids breaks down on his doorstep. The oldest of the kids, Elvis, has an insouciant manner and a thirst for adventure that Popeye soon successfully emulates, even though it means disobeying Velma's progressively specific decrees.

Popeye and Elvis never do anything really bad, nor do they put themselves in any danger, and by the end of the book it seems clear that Velma becomes willing to give Popeye a little more rope. I think it's interesting that Barbara O'Connor allows this straining at the boundaries to be a positive thing - in a middle grade book, not YA.

This is a short, funny piece of realistic fiction that will play to both boys and girls from 2nd grade on up. It's got a nice sense of space, and the environments, from Elvis's family's crowded RV to the quiet, humid woods, are beautifully written, with well-chosen details that bring them to life without bogging things down with too much description.

Colby Sharp says

I LOVE this book.

A fourth grader kept coming up to me last week, trying to tell what was going on in this book. Every couple of pages he would come up to me, so excited to share what had just happened. By the 24th time he approached me: I had to ban him from talking about this book with me until I read it. In a one sitting reading this weekend I found out why this book had my student so excited.

I can't wait to talk Popeye and Elvis with a very cool fourth grader tomorrow morning.

Allison says

Seven reasons to love this book:

1. The short lived Spit and Swear Club

2. Yoo-hoo boats
3. Secret messages
4. A dog named BOO!
5. The chronological recitation of the Kings and Queens of England
6. The Holiday Rambler and a whole bunch of mud
7. Popeye, Elvis, Calvin, Prissy, Walter, Willis, Shorty, and Princess Starletta Rainey

Carol N says

Just finished this quirky, sweet and full of mud children's book on the recommendation of my "books- bud" - Joe. This is a short, funny piece of realistic fiction that plays to both boys and girls. It's set in the small rural town of Fayette, South Carolina and deals with the unexpected friendship of Popeye and Elvis. Popeye's parents are off somewhere and he is being raised by his overprotective grandma Velma. He is on the verge of boredom when an RV full of disheveled kids breaks down at his doorstep. The oldest of the kids, Elvis, has a thirst for adventure that Popeye soon successfully emulates. Popeye and Elvis never do anything really bad, nor do they put themselves in any danger, and by the end of the book it seems clear that Popeye's life is changing for the better. Who won't like to spend his/her summer trailing into the woods, along a creek, finding boats with secret messages. Yoohoo!

Steph Su says

Nothing against the writing, or whatever. I just didn't feel like there was much going on at all, even though there was a small adventure and boats with cryptic notes inside. The "small Southern town in America" setting and feel of the book was difficult for my EL410 students to digest. However, even though at first my students thought the book was boring, they soon became interested in the "adventure," some of them going so far as to finish reading the book early.

Becky says

I loved this book. It is the best Barbara O'Connor book yet. I loved the writing, the characters, the setting, the story. And it all works together...perfectly. And I loved the built-in vocabulary lessons. Readers of this book will be impressing their elders with words like "vicissitude" and "serendipity" and "avuncular".

It's summer in Fayette, South Carolina and it's been raining for days. You can feel the agonizing boredom and loneliness that weigh down Popeye. But the rain finally stops, Popeye steps outside, and just around the bend in the road is a stuck-in-the-mud motor home--full of a bunch of squabbling kids. Popeye's small adventure is about to begin.

Popeye is being raised by his grandmother, the only responsible adult in his family. All the characters in the book are very poor. But the poverty and absent parents and good-for-nothing uncles are just the backdrop for the story...not part of the plot. Refreshing.

