

Finkumpoops!

Patrick Whittaker

from a completed novel

They're cute. They're brainy. And they're out to destroy the Earth.

Although most of this story takes place on Earth, it begins on board an alien spaceship orbiting Mars.

The spaceship is called the Wild Mouse II. It is as big as an oil tanker and shaped like a bullet that's been stepped on by an elephant.

Nearly every inch of its metal hull is as black as space itself. Even without the white skull and crossbones painted along its sides, there is something about it that screams: DANGER! KEEP AWAY!

As for the skull and crossbones: they are there to let people know that the Wild Mouse II is a pirate ship.

It belongs to a space pirate by the name of Captain Codswallop who reckons himself the toughest, meanest, most fiercesome pirate in the galaxy.

We join him just as his day is about to get completely and utterly ruined.

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Just like his ship, Captain Codswallop was all about black. His heart was black. His clothes were black. His boots, trousers, shirt, jacket and cravat were black. His hair and beard were also black.

And he shouted - a lot.

Some days, he shouted from the moment he got up to the moment he went to bed. He was even known to shout in his sleep and some of his men imagined he would be shouting long after he was dead and buried.

Captain Codswallop loved being a pirate. He loved killing and looting and being rotten to people who'd done him no harm. And he also loved funfairs, which is why he'd stolen so many of them.

As well as gold and jewels and other precious things, the holds of the Wild Mouse II were packed to the brim with

dismantled fairground rides that by rights belonged to other people.

One day, the Captain was going to be the owner of the biggest fairground in the galaxy, and that day was fast approaching. Or so he believed.

Just one more fairground was all he needed and then he could hang up his pirating boots. Which is why the Wild Mouse II was getting ready to attack a little-known planet called Earth.

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Captain Codswallop was on the bridge of the Wild Mouse II putting the finishing touches to his devilish plans when things began to go wrong.

The bridge – in case you didn't know – is what you might call the ship's control room. On the Wild Mouse II, it was a glass dome full of control panels and screens and machines that occasionally went bleep or ping. In the middle of the dome, the Captain sat in a big swivel chair.

With him were his manservant, Mister Sculoose and his chief navigators, Mister Shiver and Mr McTimbers.

Mister Shiver and Mister McTimbers manned the flight console. It was their job to steer the ship and see to it that it didn't crash into anything.

The Captain was in a good mood, though you'd be hard put to know it.

'Where be my coffee!' he shouted at poor Mister Sculoose. 'Fetch me a coffee, ye scurvy knave, afore I have ye keelhailed!'

Mister Sculoose was not human, as was obvious from his blue skin and the short, thick tail he sometimes used for swimming or playing tennis. I suppose the thing he most resembled was a lizard although not one you'd see in a zoo. Rolling two of his three eyes, he pointed at the table next to the captain's chair. 'There, Captain! There be your coffee!'

'It be cold!'

'B'ain't cold, Captain. B'ain't cold at all.'

'It be cold, I tell 'e!' The Captain snatched up the cup of coffee and promptly dropped it. 'It be hot, Mister Sculoose! Darned hot!'

REVIEWS

TSW Sharman

Thank you Patrick for being the inaugural author to submit to Effigy. I note there's a second submission which we'll get to. While this submission leans a little more middle-school than Young Adult, there are plenty of YA writers crossing between the two, and the same with readers. Think Dr. Seuss! And engaging writing is engaging writing, whichever age group it's aimed toward.

And so on to the review! First, and most important, there was nothing here that made me not want to read through the entire submission, and in fact to be intrigued as to where this is going. In particular, what jumped out at me were:

A really engaging tagline, which also sets up the meta-conflict (destroy the Earth), which is closely followed by dramatic specifics ("Just one more fairground was all he needed and then he could hang up his pirating boots. Which is why the Wild Mouse II was getting ready to attack a little-known planet called Earth.")

It's funny, I really liked "It be hot, Mister Sculoose! Darned hot!" Overall, it really has a fun, humorous tone and "narrative voice" – I can see a great many humorous situations for this unusual crew.

This leads to another thing I liked, the peculiar and humorous character of the Captain. It's a novel take on the current trend of "lovable" Pirates, although I suspect he may turn into a lovable character eventually.

What I found a little harder were some of the names, in particular Captain Codswallop wasn't as novel and interesting as many of the others. And wouldn't the ship be named something other than an Earth species (perhaps there's a joke there that comes later).

While not the gritty grainy YA fiction I'm drawn to, I'd certainly be interested in reading more.

Richard

I believe this is middle grade, rather than YA. I can see the plot, language and voice of the piece appealing to young middle grade children, not your average YA reader. These distinctions are important in the publishing world - place a book in the wrong part of the bookshop and it will never

find its intended audience. Reviewing as a young middle grade story then:

First off, it's pushing the boundaries for young middle grade fiction length, which tends to be anywhere from 15,000 to 45,000 words. That's not a showstopper, however, provided the story is sound.

I wasn't clear from the start whether Captain Codswallop is human or humanoid or "other". There are various physiological references to humans (a skull and crossbones, sitting in a swivel chair, human clothing, having a beard), but in that case, what does "they're cute, they're brainy" in the tag-line actually refer to? The ship is described as "alien", although named after an Earthly mammal species, yet the planet Earth is "little-known". So the ship is "alien" in what sense? Scru loose is a fully-fledged blue-skinned alien (loved his dual-purpose tail!), but what exactly is the Captain?

Young middle-grade stories tend to steer clear of "killing" humans as a plot device. Cartoon violence is generally OK (although even that has its detractors), violence against "monsters" is OK. Humans being killed (again, I'm not clear what Captain Codswallop is, but his stated ambition is to kill and loot on planet Earth next) is not generally OK. Think of the film *Bugsy Malone*. Instead of bullets, the junior gangsters shot custard pies at each other.

It's funny, and pacy writing, but for me it needs some thought as to where exactly it's aiming in the children's market. Where repetition and hyperbole ("toughest, meanest, most fiercesome pirate in the galaxy") are pure young middle grade language, words (and concepts) like "keelhauling" are not. And who is alien and who isn't, and why? Some more thought to the world-building might be necessary to be convincing.

Jeanette

I will say in all honesty, the thoughts of Science Fiction and space ships usually have me dropping a book back on the shelf faster than warp speed (yes I just looked that up). However, this initial read did not have me rolling my eyes and muttering "nerd" under my breath. I sense a light-hearted, chuckle inspiring story is about to transpire and actually read all the way to the end of this submission. I can visualize handing this to my hypothetical tween or young

teen on a summer day and having them wander off to their tree fort, creating an entire universe in their head while reading it and then coming home to excitedly tell me of their adventures. The names did have me half giggle in my living room.

My critique would be to not assume your audience doesn't understand things and to over explain, for example explaining what the bridge is. For people picking up a book about Space Pirates, this term is probably known. For those of us who are picking up books outside our wheelhouse, half the fun is figuring things out from context and painting the picture or looking it up if they're unsure.

All in all, I think this is off to an intriguing start and would like to see more of these adventures unfold.