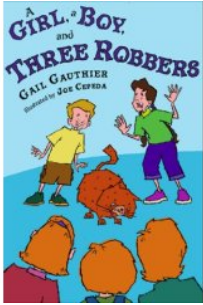


Note: This is a screen capture from Jen Robinson's Book Page blog that was hosted on Typepad. As of September 2025, Typepad has shut down and the original blog is no longer available.

## Gail Gauthier's Early Reader Blog Tour

July 02, 2008



Welcome to the latest stop on **Gail Gauthier's** early reader blog tour, in honor of the release of her latest book: [A Girl, A Boy, and Three Robbers](#) (which I [reviewed here](#)).

I don't usually do blog tours these days. However, Gail approached me about a specific tour to celebrate the launch of her second *Hannah and Brandon Stories* book, while also discussing and promoting early chapter books in general. She raised issues related to the quality of the books available for this age range and the lack of reviews that are published of books in this category. I agreed with Gail that this was a worthy thing to talk about. Instead of a traditional interview, I've chosen to participate in the form of a conversation with Gail about early readers. That is, I'm sharing my not-so-brief thoughts on this topic, and also asking Gail to share hers. Gail's responses are indented and in bold text.

I personally think that early chapter books are among the most important of all books published. These are the first books that most kids read on their own. If they are dull, or talk down to their readers, then kids learn that reading on their own is boring. How will they ever move on to the wonderful variety available for middle grade readers if they think that books are dull or annoying?

Gail, any thoughts on what the problems are with this genre, in terms of the kid appeal of what's out there?

**I think that because these readers are so young and so different from the adults who produce books, it's difficult for adults to know what works for them. While a lot of grown-ups are carrying baggage from their teen and pre-teen years, it's harder for us to remember what our day-to-day life concerns were when we were six or seven years old. You get a lot of silliness in early books, a lot of word play, a lot of funny-sounding names. Presumably the adults producing them think young kids like that sort of thing. The gimmicks often seem more important than creating a story. I just don't know how the average child reader feels about that.**

**In addition, I know back when I had children this age, parents encouraged their kids to move on from these books as soon as they were reading fluently. I think treating chapter books as mere stepping stones to something better discourages their development as their own category or genre. I wonder if there are themes and situations important to kids under eight or nine years old that they could benefit from exploring in books directed specifically to their age group. If they hurry on to middle grade books, are they missing something?**

So why don't reviewers talk about these books more? I think that the problem is that they offer the least stimulation for adult readers. Picture books have lavish illustrations, and often feature poetic text. Because picture books are written to be read to children by adults, many of them are

adult-friendly. Middle grade and young adult novels have all sorts of benefits for the adult reader. They remind us of the books that we loved when we were kids. They are filled with adventure, and often feature larger than life heroes. But early chapter books? They tend to feature limited vocabularies, have short chapters, and focus on events relevant to early elementary school kids. These events are usually not wildly exciting for adult readers. (Though I do think that the best of these books have humor going for them.)

Gail, anything to add on why this category of books tends to get neglected in reviews? Do you try to read these books yourself?

**This would be a good question for some review journal editors, Jen. While I definitely agree with everything you're saying, I don't know if individual reviewers get to choose what they review. My guess is that editors make decisions about the mix of reviews for different age groups. Back in the 90s, I was advised to direct my writing to a middle grade audience because those were the kids who were really into reading. That was what was selling at that time. Then YA exploded and that's selling well now. Many of the kidlit review journals exist to help librarians, booksellers, and other professionals make decisions about what to purchase. Do editors decide how many reviews will be published in any particular category on the basis of how that category is selling because that's what their readership is going to need to know about? Do the number of nonpicture book reviews favor middle grade and YA for that reason? In addition, many books for younger kids are parts of series. I used to hear that some publications didn't review sequels, and so subsequent titles in a series wouldn't get a lot of attention. I don't know if that's the case anymore. I do see reviews for new *Junie B. Jones* and *Clementine* books, for instance.**

**I do think writers should be aware of what's being published in their field, so, yes, I've been trying to read these books since I first became interested in writing a book for younger kids.**

Regardless of the causes, I think that we have to find a way to evaluate and publicize and write excellent books for this age range. Because otherwise our young readers won't learn to love books, and they'll never get to that magical middle grade reading stage of their lives. And that will be a huge loss.

I had an experience recently in which I read an early elementary school title and though "eh", and didn't review it. My visiting 8-year-old niece, on the other hand, sat down to read that book the moment she arrived, read it again later in the visit, and asked to take it home with her. Obviously, she saw something in that book that I didn't see.

This made me think about the other early readers that I've enjoyed recently. Sara Pennypacker's [Clementine](#) books are ones that I learned about from the teachers at [A Year of Reading](#). Mary Lee and Franki have both talked about how much their students love Clementine. I also enjoyed [The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean](#), by Alexander McCall Smith. That book was recommended to me by an eight-year-old friend from Boston. He pointed out a humorous section from early in the book, and I trusted his judgment enough to get it for myself. Then there was [Pa Lia's Big Day](#), the first of the Jackson Friends books. That recommendation came from [Kelly Herold](#), or, I think, from her son. I'm also content to recommend, sight unseen, Mo Willems' [Elephant and Piggie](#) books, on the recommendation of Jules from [Seven Impossible Things before Breakfast](#) and her daughters.

**I like books with real stories that don't involve some kind of improving lesson. I understand that there's a long history of stories with some kind of moral in children's literature, but it's not something I can get behind. I recently read *Jack Bolt and the Highwaymen's Hideout* by Richard Hamilton. It's a time travel adventure with a well developed storyline, humor, and a number of illustrations. I like the *Ivy + Bean* books by Annie Barrows, which I think I first heard about through a blog. They're realistic stories about younger girls without a lot of adult characters helping the girls out. I also liked *Violet Bing and the Grand House* by Jennifer Paros, which I think I stumbled upon at the library. Violet is an anxious child, portrayed realistically. While browsing at the library I also came upon a couple of books in the *Moose and Hildy* series by Stephanie Greene, which would be appropriate for kids on the younger end of the range we're talking about. I didn't find the books as funny as I expected them to be, but they seemed very comforting and reminded me of the *Frog and Toad* books by Arnold Lobel. I particularly dislike books that rely on low gimmicks—funny words, humor related to bodily functions, etc. I have no objection to toilet humor and bodily function jokes when they are used to define character or are part of a real story. But when that's all there is, I feel the authors don't respect their audience and believe they don't have to do legitimate work to hold readers.**

It seems to me that a pattern is emerging here. More so than with books for middle grade and YA readers, the recommendations that have interested me in early readers have come, even if indirectly, from kids themselves. Sure, I've then vetted the books, made sure that the plot flows, and the dialog feels natural, and things like that. But they've first caught the eye of kids.

But how can we depend on kids for the initial recommendations? We can't very well give every new reader a big stack of these books, and make them weed through to find the best ones. That would be turning the whole thing into homework. And yet... kids are much more qualified to make the first pass assessment of these books than we are. They know what they like. They know what books capture their attention, and make them want to read.

**You are talking about an issue that I've been thinking about for years, since soon after I started writing for children. To a great extent, children don't get to choose their own reading. That's done for them by adult authors, editors, reviewers, librarians, teachers, and parents. Realistically speaking, there's not a lot that can be done about that. The vast majority of children haven't learned enough about communicating and communicating in writing, in particular, to be able to write a book. They haven't acquired enough knowledge to edit a manuscript. It really does take a long time to learn how to do these things. So they can't provide a reading experience for their peers the way adult writers and editors can provide a reading experience for their peers, for other adults. There is no other group that doesn't have a hand in creating their own reading material. For instance, men don't have to read books that are written, edited, and reviewed only by women. Within every ethnic group there are writers who write of their cultural experiences. But that doesn't happen with kids. I can't think of any way to change that situation, but I am most definitely aware of it. I don't know that there is any way we can be sure that we're identifying books that will have the most appeal to kids. Personally, with books for younger kids I look for the same things I look for in books for any age reader—a logical, preferably unique, story and good characters. On top of that, I look for a story that is as child-oriented as possible with adult characters**

**dominating the show as little as possible. Quite honestly, I can't be sure that that overlaps with what kids are looking for.**

What do you focus on when you write books for early readers, Gail? How do you keep the writing interesting for yourself, while also keeping the book accessible for the newest readers?

**With the two books I've written specifically for this age group (and the *Aliens* books, which were for the low end of the middle grade reading group), I tried to create situations in which the kids could be on their own without a lot of adult involvement even though they are under the care of an adult. In our culture, most children six to eight or nine years old are under adult supervision of some kind. It wouldn't be realistic to have children that age wandering all over town by themselves. So I have to find a way to get the grown-ups out of the scene while keeping them nearby. With the two most recent books, I've also tried very hard to make the cultural references appropriate to the generation of my readers. For instance, if I'm going to have the kids play with Legos, I go to the Lego website to see what kinds of sets are available now. Brandon watches Animal Planet because while I was having lunch in an elementary school cafeteria a few years ago, I learned that the kids at my table were into that cable channel.**

Now, let's talk about the Hannah and Brandon books. Will there be other books in the series? I know that early readers often enjoy series books.

**My original contract was for two books. It will be up to the publisher whether or not there are more books.**

Can we expect further character development in this series? Will Brandon develop his imagination more? Will he stand up to Hannah? Will Hannah ever stop being so bossy? Will the kids get older, and have a bit more leeway from Mrs. D?

**My kneejerk reaction is that we'll never see Brandon develop his imagination. He is Mr. Practicality, Mr. Real World. He may have opportunities to use that. I would like him to have opportunities to become the hero he wants to become. As far as traditional character development is concerned, that's a hard question. *The Hannah and Brandon Stories* are all about one particular situation—a girl with a hopped up imagination who uses the books she reads as the jumping off point for games she imposes on a reluctant companion. If the characters develop too much, then the situation changes and we have a totally different story. *The Hannah and Brandon Stories* are not parts of a serial. We're not talking one massive storyline that's so big it needs multiple volumes in order to be completed and you see all kinds of changes over the time span of the story being told. This is a traditional series. The books are each new adventures but following the same pattern. Though I do have one birthday story in mind, if the kids get too much older, we no longer have books about kids in the primary grades. I was thinking of Sherlock Holmes and Watson when I created Hannah and Brandon—a powerful, dramatic protagonist with a more run-of-the-mill sidekick who narrates. I don't remember a great deal of character development in the Holmes stories or changes in the relationship between Holmes and Watson.**

How do you get Brandon's voice so right? Are you channeling some sort of inner 8-year-old boy, or do you spend time listening to kids in this age range?

**I tried a draft from Hannah's point of view, and she just sounded like one more stereotypically smart girl. I tried a draft from a third-person point of view, and it sounded very instructive. Brandon's point of view was the one that worked. I have no explanation for why that happened other than to say that I am the mother of boys. My yard was full of boys for many years. Little boys are very close to my heart.**

I love the way many of Hannah's games seem to be inspired by books. Is this something you set out to do, or do you just think about what imaginary games kids would enjoy, and some of them happen to match up to books that you've read? If the former, are there games that the reader might not recognize, but that are also inspired by particular books (like the Vampire game at the start of *A Girl, A Boy, and Three Robbers*)?

**Yes, all the games are supposed to be inspired by books. All the stories are built around book "types" I recall from my lifetime of reading, and they are all types that exist in kidlit, though maybe not in early chapter books. At [the Hannah and Brandon site](#), you can find a page called [What's Hannah Been Reading?](#) that lists age appropriate books related to the stories in the Hannah and Brandon books. It's a work in progress, and I haven't gotten to the *Three Robbers* book yet. There are many vampire books for kids. I just haven't yet found one I think Hannah could have read that strikes me as just right for the page.**

**The pirate chapters in the first book came about because I had just seen one of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. I knew there were pirate books for kids, so I ran with it. Last week I saw *Seven Samurai*. I wondered about a samurai story for Hannah and Brandon, but I'm not aware of much in the way of samurai books for young kids, so I'm not too interested in pursuing that line of thought.**

I also like the way that Mrs. D is as a parent, flexible about the imaginary games, but strict when it comes to staying in the yard, wearing boots in the rain, etc. But then I love the scene where Brandon and Hannah manipulate her, by suggesting that another parent has insulted the family cat. Is this something that you deliberately provide for kids of this age range, the combination of a firm parent with the occasional kid triumph?

**I don't think of it so much as kids triumphing as I do giving them the best lines and the opportunity to solve the problems. I never want adults to be the problem solvers or clear heroes in my books. Children will always be the center of everything in the children's books I write. However, I want the adults to be realistic, too. Those ineffectual, bumbling parents you see in a lot of kids' books really set my teeth on edge. I also do nurturing parents because I feel monster moms and dysfunctional dads are pretty well covered by other writers. There's nothing wrong with them appearing in kids' books. The world just doesn't need me to be creating any more of them.**

Do you have any plans for other books for this age range, not part of this series?

**I have been thinking for many years about a *365 Bedtime Story* book that I was very fond of when I was a child. I'd like to do something contemporary along that line, but it would involve 365 one-page stories. I'm finding that pretty overwhelming. Nonetheless, I've been thinking this year about the families and characters that might be involved and some story arcs.**

Do you have any advice for other writers working on books for this age range?

1. **Search for good stories and original characters, just as you would if you were writing for any other age group.**
2. **Try to avoid doing what everyone else is doing. There seems to be a lot of duplication out there, lots of far-fetched superhero stories, lots of cute girl stories.**
3. **Avoid gimmicks. Treat your readers with respect.**

And that's all for today. Thanks so much for stopping by, Gail.