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How did Jon Scieszka get so funny, anyway? Growing up as one of six brothers was a good start, but that was just the beginning. Throw in Catholic school, lots of comic books, lazy summers at the lake with time to kill, babysitting misadventures, TV shows, jokes told at family dinner, and the result is *Knucklehead*. Part memoir, part scrapbook, this hilarious trip down memory lane provides a unique glimpse into the formation of a creative mind and a free spirit.

Watch a QuickTime trailer for this book.

Knucklehead: Tall Tales and Mostly True Stories of Growing Up Scieszka Details

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Author : Jon Scieszka

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From Reader Review Knucklehead: Tall Tales and Mostly True Stories of Growing Up Scieszka for online ebook

Brittany says

Amazing. Laugh out loud funny. Reminds me of Bill Bryson's Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid... but for kids.

I'm also positive that Jon Scieszka and my father were best friends, somehow defying the time and space that separated their childhoods in Flint, Michigan and Chicago. Polish knuckleheads with amazing Catholic school stories and a deep-rooted love of the BOINK! sound effect from the Three Stooges: a match made in comedy heaven.

Finally answers the question, "What's so funny, Mr. Scieszka?"

Really, though...

Arminzerella says

Jon grew up with his parents and his 5 brothers in a small house in Flint, Michigan. The brothers got into plenty of scraps with one another, which earned them the fond "knuckleheads!" appellation from their father. My favorite story is the one where Jon and his brother "put out" their space heater by peeing on it. Yeah, that wasn't a great idea. A close second is the story about how the boys' mother is more concerned with proper grammar and vocabulary than she is about the fact that her sons are peeing on each other (I'm sorry, "urinating" on each other). Kids (and particularly boys) are likely to pee themselves (urinate themselves?) reading these and other tales from Knucklehead.

Viking Press should be happy with its marketing department – the cover on this book is great – a photo of Jon's face is super-imposed onto a comic-esque image of an army guy popping his head out of a tank that's obviously in the middle of some kind of war zone (making this an appealing biography for reluctant reader guys – who doesn't want to know about the kid in the tank?). For kids that still don't know who Jon Scieszka is, remind them he's the author of the ever popular *Stinky Cheese Man: And Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, as well as *Squids Will Be Squids*. These two silly books should rouse them to appreciate his "mostly true" childhood stories. Chapters in Knucklehead are short, and sometimes repeat words/phrases/sentences from other chapters, but this should help reluctant or beginning readers master the text more quickly.

Karen says

This book triggered great memories from my own childhood. I wasn't a "boy" but did all the boy kind of things with my older brother. For me it was a walk back through time. Even down to the fort playing war, I lived in an open area, blowing up models. My brother and I would spend hours making army models and minutes blowing them up. Can't remember where the firecrackers came from. Building forts was the best and with all the open area and scrap wood around we never tired. The only roll was to be home before the street lights came on.

Monica Edinger says

This was a very quick and enjoyable read. I read the ARC (as the book is due out this fall) and will be curious to see how it looks in its final form. It consists of a series of short amusing stories about the author's childhood. Very boyish, lighthearted, and a lot of fun to read. There are stories that made me think of other books (e.g. several...er...pissing...episodes), but there didn't seem to be as many injured animals in this one (especially if you don't count Jon's youngest brother). One thing about those pissing stories --- I remember being around five and having quite the argument with a neighbor boy about girls not being able to piss as easily as boys and trying to prove him wrong. But, hell, while I may have been able to pull down my pants and do what I needed to do in the backyard bushes, I did not have the necessary equipment to have fought the Scieszka bros pissing wars.

The book is direct, the author doesn't shy away from not-so-nice behaviors (such as charging his brother to allow him to stay up late when babysitting), and it just gives a sense of a rather happy childhood in the vein of Christopher Paul Curtis's *Watson's Go to Birmingham* (which takes place in Flint during the same time period although, of course, is much weightier themewise) in terms of humor and a close-knit family.

I'm guessing (not having been a boy myself) that many of these stories are going to really grab boys in particular. The intent, no doubt. Do look out for it!

Cameron G. says

I recently finished the book *Knucklehead* by: Jon Scieszka. This book is an autobiography about Jon's childhood growing up as the 2nd born out of 6 kids. Each chapter is about a small adventure he had growing up. The brothers are reckless, crazy, and will do anything for an adventure (even break their brother Greg's collarbone 3 times). The brothers also love to set up toy army men then make them explode in some crazy way. I Can and can't relate to Jon. I can relate to him because he and his brothers are athletic and like to play baseball. I can't relate to him because he has siblings and is very crazy. I think that this book is great and that anyone who likes humor books will not want to put it down.

Lynn says

What a treat! The format is so appealing - it looks like a comic book and the chapters are short and filled with the exploits of 6 little boys growing up in Flint, Michigan. Boys will love this book! If you are a boy, were a boy, grew up with boys or raised or taught boys you will love this book! It is the kind of book you read aloud to anyone within earshot. Or you try to read it aloud. I was laughing so hard I had to end up giving the book to my husband to read for himself. There is a chapter that has a car trip, a Stuckey's pecan log and a barfing cat that had me laughing so hard I got the hiccups. Sheer pleasure! Thank you Jon Scieska!

paula says

Jon Scieszka has five brothers. Jon Scieszka is a funny writer. Ergo, Jon Scieszka's stories about growing up with his five brothers = funny. Oh yeah - I laughed out loud. I read bits aloud to the librarians in the workroom who wanted to know just what was so damn funny, and they laughed out loud. But we're moms. Moms of boys. We have to think boys are funny, or else go googoo and end up carted away in a van.

And I also believe that Knucklehead will make children laugh out loud. There is fire, there is urination. There is getting away with stuff, and there is not a single one of those Peruvian hats with the pigtails down the side that make everyone - EVERYONE - look like Luke Wilson making his very best confused face.

Sorry. Distracted. Been writing in a coffee house lately while my house gets some work done. ("While we're in there fixing the deviated ceiling, how about we give you a whole new kitchen at the same time? Wouldn't you like your kitchen to look like... THIS?" I believe that's also how my mother's cousin Margaret got Patty Duke's nose.)

Back to Knucklehead. Funny, definitely funny. Very reminiscent of Bill Sleator's Oddballs, also a collection of funny stories from the author's childhood, many involving mud. And while the author packs in plenty of forbidden fruit, like how to construct a mortar ("Don't try this at home" - yeah thanks, Mr. Ambassador. My kids get ahold of this and we can say bye-bye to the attic window! (If we're lucky.)), there are also tons of positive messages about the joys of playing outside, the glories of Go, Dog. Go!, the good things about grandparents, Reading Is Fun, and... the value of military academy. Also, the chapters are short enough and the reading level low enough to hand it to, oh, grade 2 and above.

But the thing is, I have never successfully gotten a kid to read Oddballs. The fault in the case of that book may lie with the cover, which is I think more appealing to grownups who like Joseph Cornell and Robertson Davies than it is to kids. But it may be the nostalgia. It may be that kids just aren't as interested in true-life stories that aren't recognizable to them.

If it's the cover, the Scieszka book is going to go better: the cover of Knuckleheads resembles a pulp comic book, with 9-year-old G.I. Jon popping out of a tank turret. But if it's the nostalgia... listen, I'm only ten years younger than our Ambassador, but the world described in Knuckleheads already feels like my parents' generation. Men in skinny ties, nuns in habits with full wimple.

On the other hand, the family that took us in and fed us last night mentioned that they are reading Knuckleheads together, and laughing their butts off. Specifically, the Crossing Swords chapter was mentioned, and I'll say this: "Crossing Swords," in which Scieszka describes how he and his brothers could turn even going to the bathroom into an opportunity for imaginative play (and hoo boy is that the most sedate description you'll ever read for that particular activity!), may well establish this book as the passed-around page-marked Diary of a Wimpy Kid for this year. I'll even go so far as to call those few pages Jon Scieszka's ticket to immortality, and that's saying something.

Certainly we'll be mentioning his name as we mop up the bathroom floor - here's to you, Mr. Ambassador!

Malbadeen says

The problem with Jon Scieszka is that I like him so unabashedly that I'm not sure I can be objective about his books. He is funny in a silly but not an immature way. He is honest with kids (laughingly admitting that not only does he watch t.v - uh, ah, hush. hush. but he gets ideas from t.v.) His respect for kids is evident in his demeanor, his writing and other professional pursuits.

He's like the relative you're actually excited to see at the family reunion. And this book is like being the younger kid in the room while that reunion takes place and you get to hear all the crazy/silly/stupid things your dad and his siblings did when they were young.

It is a chapter by chapter memory of events such as sword fighting with streams of urine, making a younger sibling eat cigarette butts, tying a babysitter in the closet, etc. and they're all true and all from his childhood.

I am tempted to not mention the fact that this book can be read in one sitting by an "accomplished" reader and is perfect for "reluctant" readers, with its ultra short chapters and plain (but NOT boring) speak, because it stands on its own as a super fun read that lets you further into the world of an author BUT one more great thing about Jon Scieszka is his focus on bringing the reluctant reader (specifically boys) into the fold of READER! And you'll just have to trust me, or better yet, read this book and check out his website to know that he does it, as per his norm, in a respectful, genuine, fun way that might actually work for some kids.

www.guysread.com

Megan says

I had to stop everything we were doing to read this one aloud to my students. Even though they are really enjoying our current read aloud, when I read one little chapter out of this book they were hooked and wanted more. I have to say it is one of the best fifth grade read aloud books that I have used in a long time.

Elise says

This book was full of funny stories about growing up in a family with a bunch of brothers. Unfortunately, the stories are told without any of the details that make such stories entertaining. So it's a book of boring funny stories. For instance, he talks about how his brother broke his collarbone four times while playing. But you don't get any details. That's pretty much it. "My brother broke his collarbone when we were playing. Four times!" That's not a riveting tale of childhood or brotherhood.

Dave says

I heard about this book at a Language Arts conference during a book talk. Lo and behold, it was in the library at school sitting on a shelf display collecting dust. Obvious target audience: middle school kids. Scieszka tells stories of his youth, growing up middle class in Flint, Michigan with 5 brothers. Amusing tales transpire about the shenanigans the boys find themselves in the middle of as a result of their own "male" behavior. Having a young boy myself here at home, I can appreciate many of the humorous anecdotes he recalls. With

just one boy, it is impossible to keep the house tidied and things occasionally break. I can only imagine Scieszka's parents' patience with six rugrats running around. Light, comical fare; easy one-day read; recommend even if you do not fit into one of the targeted demographics.

Betsy says

To adults that don't normally wander through the shelves of children's literature the notion of the autobiography for kids is a pretty odd beast. You write a book about yourself, sure. But why would you make the primary audience for that book people who think that boogers and farts are the height of wit and sophistication? Fact of the matter is an autobiography written with a child audience in mind needs a hook. Your life, particularly your life as a kid, has to have had something interesting about it. Many of us probably look back on those years only to sigh and determine that absolutely nuthin' interesting went on back then that would sufficiently engage a ten-year-old. Not Jon Scieszka. You want a hook? Try five brothers. Five brothers and Catholic school. Five brothers and Catholic school and a mess of stories involving bodily functions and super cool (and not so cool) toys. Mr. Scieszka proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that when it comes to recounting your youth, there's nothing like a plethora of XX chromosomes to keep the readers reading.

He was born the second Scieszka, after Jim, before Tom, Gregg, Brian, or Jeff. You want to know where the author of books like *The Stinky Cheese Man* gets his ideas? This book provides the answer. Using bite sized chapters rarely more than two to three pages in length we get a firsthand account of what it's like to grow up as a child of the fifties and sixties alongside five other bros where being a guy takes up all of your time. The book is written in such a way that readers are almost encouraged to flip back and forth through it to get all the good stuff, but in the order they prefer. So if you happened to skip Chapter 13 about Gregg's broken collarbone and you get to Chapter 19 which references the incident in passing, never fear. It's easy to take *Knucklehead* as it comes to you. There are thirty-eight chapters in total and each one's a heckuva lot of fun.

Read enough of these authorial auto-bios and after a while you start seeing similarities. That section about peeing on the heater in the bedroom? Well that's mighty similar to the peeing on the heater section in Chris Crutcher's book *King of the Mild Frontier*. Not because one was cribbed from the other or anything. It just seems that peeing on heaters is one of those universal things boys like to do, and it sure does make for great reading. As I read Scieszka's book I also started flashing back to some talks I've heard fellow author Eoin Colfer give about his own years with a big family, and the disgusting hijinks he and his siblings engaged in. When the candid and the funny are one and the same, you've got the makings of a hit on your hands.

Actually, maybe I shouldn't use the word "candid". Since the subtitle of this book says that it involves "tall tales and mostly true stories" then the readers should have some fun trying to figure out where Jon exaggerates. It's tough. A lot of these are so weird you can't help but think they're true. That story about how Jon would faux call the Bad Boys' Home while brother sitting? Sounds about right. The one about breaking Gregg's collarbone? Jon has the photographic proof right there (and even a picture where Gregg looks like he's a "third-grade pro football player"). No, I think my doubting Thomas nature came into play more along the lines of the chapter called "Car Trip" which involves brothers, a cat, and an unfortunate pecan nut log in a vomit-fest that certainly strains at the tensile threats of my credulity. And maybe the dry cleaning bag incident. I mean it's just too cool.

The design of this book is groovy, keen, awesome, neato no question. From the faux ads on the back to the sheer overwhelming swath of photographs, graphs, x-rays, pictures, and clip art peppered throughout, this

puppy's a visual humdinger. The kind of thing that makes you scratch your head and say, "I wonder if he would have gotten this much cool art design help if he wasn't our National Ambassador of Children's Literature?" Which is an uncharitable thought, perhaps, so you'd have to banish it from your brain forthwith and just enjoy the pictures instead. It's clear that Mr. Scieszka, creator of the Guys Read movement that encourages boys to read, knows how to make an autobiography that reluctant readers will dig. Everything about this book is tailor made for the kid who thinks that they don't like books. The chapters are very short and the text continually broken up by the visuals.

In New York anyway the go-to autobiography assigned by teachers over and over again is Jerry Spinelli's *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*. Now at long last it looks as if Jerry will finally see a challenger to his throne. I've heard Mr. Scieszka present one or two of the chapters of this book live and since he has a tendency to go off-script (particularly when he's discussing his own life) there are things he has mentioned live that didn't quite make it into *Knucklehead*. That's okay. I don't think anyone's going to accuse the man of not including enough information. As a reluctant reader pick and the kind of autobiography kids are going to fight to read first, this book is definitely a must-add title for any library's shelves. Good clean stuff. Without the "clean" part so much.

Ages 9-12.

jo says

I've said it before and I'll say it again: Jon Scieszka is a creative genius.

Knucklehead: Tall Tales and Almost True Stories of Growing Up Scieszka is a hilarious memoir (geared toward the 9-12 set) filled with short vignettes about what it's like to grow up in a family of six kids. Six boys, no less. And just in case that family structure alone isn't comedy itself, try this: six boys in Catholic school.

Of course, growing up in a family of six kids myself (we were five girls, one boy...comedy of another sort), the stories made me grin, guffaw, and repeatedly force my husband to read and re-read chapters. It's that kind of book. The kind you have to share because it's just cruel to keep that much funny to yourself.

After the first couple chapters, I decided to ration myself and only read one chapter a night. I didn't want it to end, and what better way to go to sleep than after a good chuckle?

More than anything, *Knucklehead* is a testament to the strength of sibling relationships. Jon Scieszka's book illuminates the mystery of how you can sell your brother his own shirt, get him to eat a burnt out cigarette butt, pee on him, and even break his collar bone, and still come out laughing on the other side.

Here's an NPR story about *Knucklehead* (with some excerpts from the book at the bottom of the page).

Here's a great Reading Rockets interview with Jon Scieszka about growing up with five brothers, teaching elementary school, his unconventional style, and how to get boys interested in reading.

Tasha says

I firmly believe that Jon Scieszka set out to write the most boy-friendly book in the world, and succeeded. This autobiographical book has all the elements that boys want. It is guaranteed to fly off the shelves thanks to the amazing vintage comic-book cover. When boys read it, they are bound to share it with their friends thanks to the firecrackers, peeing, barfing, and continuous wild antics of the Scieszka brothers. But what the cover and the louder moments of the book won't reveal is the lovely tone of the book that captures boyhood and brotherhood with such ease. The author is right there laughing with us at each event, loving looking back into his childhood together.

He is also doing other important things, vital things for his young male readers. He is showing boys that it is just fine to be pure boys. To be silly, wild, crude, and violent. That humor is contagious and that laughing together is powerful. That being unique or even a little odd is just fine. And that adults need not approve for it to be a great great story.

I read this book aloud to my sons at bedtime. During the two weeks we shared the book together, they asked to go to bed EARLY multiple times to hear the story continue! There was a visceral connection there, a community of men and boys being built, there was wonder, humor, and definitely wild abandon.

Anyone looking for an incredible read aloud for boys has found it here. Age appropriateness is up to you as a parent. There are crude things here in all of their bodily-function glory. I happily read it to my own seven-year-old, but probably would not use it with a class of 2nd graders. This is a treasure of a nonfiction book. Share it with the knuckleheads in your life.

Jonathan says

Is it sad that I didn't really care about his life. He is pretty ordinary and I felt like he probably was just stuck on ideas for a next book so he thought, autobiography, that should be easy enough. I'll take a super average life, add some funny pictures and captions and make millions. Just took a lot away from how great of an author he is.
