

Title: Is Junie B. Jones Talking Trash? _____

Author(s): Anna Jane Grossman

Source: *The New York Times*. (July 26, 2007): Lifestyle: pG1(L).

Document Type: Article

~~The New York Times~~

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 2007 The New York Times Company

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Full Text:

AT her all-day princess-theme party for her graduation from preschool, Lyra Alvis had her face painted, went first down the water slide and was even allowed to eat the flower on the cake. "It was the best day of my life," said Lyra, 5, who lives in Nashville.

At least until bedtime. That is when her father, Lance Alvis, did something he'd never done before: Midway through a book that was a gift from a friend, he insisted she pick out something different to read.

"But I love this book," Lyra said.

The paperback in question was about Junie B. Jones, the hero of a popular Random House early reading series that has divided parents since it was introduced 15 years ago. With more than 43 million copies in print and a stage show touring the country, the series has its share of die-hard fans and is required summer reading at many elementary schools.

But more than a few parents have taken issue with Junie B., as she is called. Their disagreement is a pint-size version of the lingering education battle between advocates of phonics, who believe children should be taught proper spelling and grammar from the outset, and those who favor whole language, a literacy method that accepts misspellings and other errors as long as children are engaged in reading and writing.

The spunky kindergartener (first grader in more recent volumes) is prone to troublemaking, often calls people names and isn't averse to talking back to her teachers. And though she is the narrator of the stories, she struggles with grammar. Her adverbs lack the suffix "ly"; subject and object pronouns give her problems, as do possessives; she usually isn't able to conjugate irregular past tense verbs; and words like funnest and beautifuller are the mainstays of her vocabulary.

Children, however, are not usually strict grammarians. And it's rare to find a child that isn't quickly seduced by these silly, often slapstick stories. Even adults who are rankled by Junie B.'s impulsive, oft-unpunished shenanigans (playing with scissors or head-butting other children, for instance), can occasionally laugh at her odd little-girlisms. They include her passion for fixing toilets with her "grampa," her desire to name her little brother "Mrs. Gutzman" after her favorite cafeteria lady, or her belief that green cucumber-like vegetables are named "Sue Keeny."

Parenthood, though, is full of choices. Breast-feeding: Yea or nay? Muesli or Cap'n Crunch? Public or private school?

And now: To Junie B. or not to Junie B.?

The series has been banned in Lewis and Susan Bartell's home in Old Westbury, N.Y.

"My dad doesn't like the grammar," said the Bartells's youngest, Mollie, 9. "And I guess that's important, because maybe when you grow up and you're at work and you say, 'I runned,' people will get annoyed at you."

She added: "I'm also not allowed to watch R-rated movies, but nobody is these days."

The series, which had its 27th installment in February, has, like the Harry Potter series, been on the New York Times children's book series best-seller list since the list was started three years ago.

"Of our series books, it's the most popular one we have that's about a little girl," said Elizabeth Bird, a librarian at the Donnell Library Center's Central Children's Room in Midtown Manhattan. "But it splits people down the middle. There are parents who will defend her till their death and those that call her loathsome. It's unusual to find that sort of divide for early chapter books. They're just not the sort of books that usually get much attention."

Among librarians and teachers, Junie B. has become as familiar a name as Ramona, Pippi or Eloise, but unlike her predecessors she hasn't been around quite long enough to straddle multiple generations. Many parents in their 20s, 30s and 40s are only now discovering the series as their children enter kindergarten and grammar school.

With every new kindergarten class comes attempts to ban the books. In 2004 Barbara Park was selected as one of the American Library Association's 10 Most Frequently Challenged Authors, alongside Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and John Steinbeck.

"I've never been in such good company!" said Ms. Park, 60, who before creating the impish heroine wrote nonserialized books for slightly older children. In the early '90s, Random House approached her about writing an easy-to-read chapter book series because they wanted a humorous main character, and she'd become known for an ability to make children laugh.

"I didn't know if my humor could really go down to the 5- or 6-year-old reading level," said Ms. Park, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz. "But I said I'd try, and the way I decided to go about that was to write in first person as a 5-year-old. That's the way I best like to write, putting myself in the head of a character.

"I knew she'd make mistakes in every area of her life, socially and grammatically, and that'd be O.K.," she said. "All of my characters are less than perfect. I find the term 'perfect child' to be an oxymoron."

When the series began, most of the response from parents was overwhelmingly positive. But within a year, inflammatory letters trickled in.

"The first negative letter was from a grandmother in Minnesota who was annoyed that Junie B. had acted out and that she wasn't using the Queen's English," Ms. Park said. "This woman was incensed."

She insists that the majority of her mail is positive, but the negative responses sting, and she's loath to talk about them.

"I've stopped reading about my books on the Internet because it's too hurtful," she said. "People act as if

I'm teaching children how to blow up cats. The worst thing she does is maybe call someone stupid, but that's just her being a 5-year-old. You'd hear worse than that walking across any playground! And when she acts out, kids who are reading it know that she's doing something wrong."

Mr. Alvis wasn't so sure about that. Nor are some of the more vocal parents who discuss the books on Web sites like Craigslist and UrbanBaby. Most of the books have earned an average rating of at least four stars out of five from Amazon readers, but the negative reviews are brutal.

"I am going to throw them out," one said. "I wouldn't give them away, because I don't want anyone else to read them."

Another wrote, "I find this the mental equivalent of toxic waste." But those who loved the series are often flummoxed that parents would say that any book that a child enjoys should be deemed unacceptable.

"These are books that are funny and interesting," said Michael Reinemer of Annandale, Va., who reads the Junie B. Jones books to his youngest son, Leif, 5. "I think they encourage him to want to read. Kids can find humor in the way things go wrong."

And what of the language?

"If you read 'Huckleberry Finn' you can't help but notice the terrible grammar, but that doesn't make it an unenjoyable read," he said. "Sure, maybe Junie B. isn't everyone's cup of tea. But when she does things wrong or says things incorrectly, it provides an opportunity to talk about how things should be."

Sandra Scales of Fairfax, Va., tried going that route with her 9-year-old daughter Caitlyn Siwek, "but I think it took me like a month to read one book because there were so many misspelled words that I didn't understand, and we had to talk about every little thing," Caitlyn said. Ms. Scales discovered the books when Caitlyn checked one out of the library and started reading them aloud while Ms. Scales was driving.

"She spelled out a word she didn't know, but it was spelled wrong, so I said, 'Let me see that, that can't be right,'" Ms. Scales said. After delving a little further into the text, she wrote to Random House. They wrote that books for children don't always have to be educational to be valuable.

"No wonder we have declining literacy and writing proficiency rates in this country!" Ms. Scales said. "In the letter they said that it was written in 'vernacular.' My thought was, 'vernacular?' 'Tom Sawyer' is written in 'vernacular,' and no one would consider it an easy read for a young child."

Not long thereafter, she began to debate the series with other parents on About.com, which is owned by The New York Times Company. On that Web site, she found that her distaste for the books was on par with her distaste for the people defending them. "People who were taking exception to the people who take exception to the series were the ones using words like 'dumb' and 'stupid,'" she said. "There's this bizarre bullying thing that happened."

Jill Ratzan, a doctoral student in library and information science at Rutgers University, said Junie B.'s English is actually more complex and interesting than most realize -- and possibly more "correct."

"I believe 'perfect grammar' is any grammar that works," said Ms. Ratzan, whose paper on the series, "You Are Not the Boss of My Words," was published in the journal *Children and Libraries* in 2005. "Junie B is actually following the precise rules of English. What she's not following are the exceptions."

For example, she said, "As adult English speakers, we know that the word 'run' has an exception in the past tense and is therefore 'ran.' But other verbs, you'd just add 'ed,' and she's following that rule to the letter, even though she's at an age where she has not yet been taught formal grammatical rules. She just knows them."

Ms. Ratzan also notes that the trend of language's evolution is toward this kind of regularization, which means Junie B. might be teaching children the English of the future. But, she said, "Just because they read 'funnest' doesn't mean they'll learn to say that. I've never heard a kid speak in a Yorkshire accent because they read 'The Secret Garden' or say 'Have you any wool?' "

In the weeks since that fateful bedtime argument, Mr. Alvis has softened. "The turning point was when I asked Lyra if she wanted to act like or talk like Junie B. Jones. She looked at me like I was insane," he said.

In the Bartell household, however, Junie B. Jones continues to be *girla non grata*.

"But that's O.K. I'm reading a really good book about a boy whose parents think some of his video games are inappropriate," Mollie said. "It's called 'Diary of a Wimpy Kid.' "

CAPTION(S):

Photos: FRIENDS AND FOES: Caitlyn Siwek, above, had trouble with the Junie B. Jones series. Her mother complained to the book publisher about the style of writing used by the author, Barbara Park, below (pg.G6). (Above, Susana Raab for The New York Times; below, Norma Jean Gargas/Getty Images for The New York Times).; PAGE TURNER: Michael Reinemer with his son Leif, 5, who is a fan of Junie B. Jones. (pg.G1). (Left, Stephanie Kuykendal for The New York Times; above, Lars Klove for The New York Times).

By ANNA JANE GROSSMAN

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Grossman, Anna Jane. "Is Junie B. Jones Talking Trash?" *New York Times* 26 July 2007: G1(L). *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Web. 5 Apr. 2015.

URL

<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA166806039&v=2.1&u=mont41605&it=r&p=EAIM&sw=w&asid=9701f92f95ee52ffe344dda378ee067c>

Gale Document Number: GALE|A166806039