

'The Perfect Score' a great read for kids

"The Perfect Score" by Rob Buyea — Reviewed by George Bennett, fourth-through sixth-grade teacher at Village School

Rob Buyea hit the ground running back in 2010, with his excellent debut novel, "Because of Mr. Terupt," which was reviewed in the Athol Daily News as part of the Village School's book review series.

Buyea established a style of having a number of narrators tell the story of an eventful year in the life of a fifth-grade class, which he continued through two sequels as the same characters lived through sixth and seventh grade.

Buyea's fourth book, "The Perfect Score," has a new cast of characters, in a different school, but his unerring ear for children's dialogue, and his understanding of their dilemmas, is as strong as ever. Indeed, "The Perfect Score" is in some ways even better than the previous books, not least because the central problem confronting the books' five narrators — and their whole school — is one that has become near-universal in the nation's public schools.



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George Bennett

The five sixth-grade narrators all have their own individual problems. Would-be football star Gavin is forced to babysit his younger sister every day, so he can't attend football practice; gymnastics hopeful Randi has been turned off from the sport she used to love by her pushy coach; Trevor is bullied by his older brother; Scott is full of well-meaning ideas for helping people that always go wrong, and Natalie is an aspiring lawyer whose know-it-all attitude alienates all her classmates.

Each character struggles with his or her problems, all of which overlap with the lives of their classmates, but all five are united in disliking, and finally opposing, the way standardized tests are taking over everything they used to like about their school.

The children also begin to understand that their teachers, and even their principal, are as much in fear of the test results as they are, but that is of little comfort as the administration takes away one thing after another in order to make more time for test preparation. The class loses first its respected teacher's read-alouds, then recess, engaging and excursive math problems, and finally after-school clubs, all of

which fall beneath the wheels of the juggernaut test regime.

When Gavin — who's a struggling reader — discovers that eligibility for next year's football team will depend on his test score, he begins to panic, as does Trevor, for whom after-school football is the only way he will be able to get a break from the bullying of his brother.

The five narrators all end up in an after-school outreach program, and work first in restoring the neglected children's area in the local library, and then begin a series of visits to a local senior center. Most of the group have been enrolled against their will or as a consequence of some misdemeanor, and they have little sympathy for each other, but gradually they begin to appreciate each other, and to work together more closely.

As the children begin to gel as a group, they realize the upcoming tests are a problem for all of them, and Scott, who is disorganized but clever, comes up with a way for the whole class to ace the tests, and satisfy the school administration. However, as always with Scott's ideas, there's a catch. Author Buyea produces a complex and gripping web of individual stories, all of which are interwoven with the threat posed by the tests. The resolution of all these difficulties is satisfying and realistic, and even says something important and thoughtful about testing in general, without being either forced or preachy.

Buyea's use of multiple narrators is even more assured and natural than it was in his earlier books, and "The Perfect Score" is one of the best children's books to come our way in the past year. It's ideal for sixth- through eighth-graders, and if you loved "Because of Mr. Terupt," you won't be able to put this book down.