



A Boy and A Bear in a Boat

Dave Shelton

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A boy and a bear go to sea, equipped with a suitcase, a comic book, and a ukulele. The bear assures the boy that they are traveling a short distance and it really shouldn't take very long. But then they encounter "unforeseeable anomalies": turbulent stormy seas! a terrifying sea monster! and the rank remains of The Very Last Sandwich. The odds are pitted against the boy and the bear and their boat.

Will the *Harriet*, their trusted vessel, withstand the violent lashings of the salty waves? And will anyone ever answer their message in a bottle?

From the Hardcover edition.

A Boy and A Bear in a Boat Details

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From Reader Review A Boy and A Bear in a Boat for online ebook

Kaethe says

It's hard not to be bored by a book that keeps telling us how bored the boy is. I can't be bothered to try, no matter how much I liked the cover.

Ben Babcock says

There's a boy, and a bear, and they are on a boat. No, not "on a boat". Actually, more kind of *in* a boat. A rowboat. Named *Harriet*.

Bears are not cuddly. They are ferocious wild animals that really just want to be left alone, to roam through the wild and eat fish and have bear sex. So I'm not quite sure how we went from bears mauling people to teddy bears and anthropomorphic bears who wear boots or hang around with that Christopher Robin kid. I wonder if there is a middle, transition state out there somewhere ... a kind of supercharged Pooh Bear on steroids, looking to defend his territory and steal your camp food.

Huh. I just Googled for that last thing, and ... I don't recommend that you do the same. I am now scarred for life.

Literature has a long, rich history of irresponsible parents letting boys get into boats captained by a vicious animal. (Yes, I maintain both that *one* book constitutes a tradition and that Richard Parker was the captain of that lifeboat. Because he totally was.) My initial reaction was, "Gee, I wonder when this boy will be eaten?" What followed was a long series of suspenseful events in which Dave Shelton expertly manipulated this expectation to the point where I was completely hooked.

First there was the sandwich debacle. The boy wakes up after dozing off only to find it's the next day, and instead of arriving at their destination, they are lost. Well, he thinks they are lost. Captain Bear insists they are not—but you can't trust a bear to read a map, because bears can't read. Everyone knows this. Also, as it turns out, the map is actually just a massive blue rectangle with a grid system overlaid. The bear has several such maps, one of which has a rock marked on it. I can only assume that the bear hired a particularly lazy cartographer. Or perhaps just one who wasn't very good.

So the boy and the bear are lost, with their boat. They use up their provisions until they are down to the Very Last Sandwich (capitalization not mine). It's not a very appealing sandwich, so they lock it in a lunchbox, until it escapes. It then becomes Chekov's Very Last Sandwich, in the sense that it reappears later in the book to wreak further havoc and destruction. Meanwhile, the boy and the bear need to resort to some creative fishing to survive, which lands them in a different sort of trouble. As the hazards mount and their relationship deteriorates, it starts to look like the boy and the bear will never get home.

There is never a dull moment in this book, despite the boy's protests to the contrary. And accompanying these action-packed paragraphs are pages of beautiful illustrations from Shelton himself. Indeed, though the story itself is a little simplistic, the illustrations definitely augment it. Everything from the boy's grumpy looks to the bear's particular sense of detached bumbling comes alive in Shelton's hand.

Considering its audience, I suppose this is a satisfying book. I think it could overstay its welcome, and Shelton doesn't always raise the stakes; he merely changes them. The boy and the bear aren't on an

adventure or a quest so much as a series of unforeseen events, and while it's an entertaining read, at the end there isn't really much of a sense of accomplishment. Perhaps it's true that the boy learned something. But we'll never know, of course, since the bear ate him.

Kidding.

I can only express some disappointment that *A Boy and a Bear on a Boat* is rather lonely among this year's Carnegie nominees. I'd like to pitch my tent behind this endearing little tale, but there really are just a few other novels that captured my attention more, if only because they are for the older crowd. This is monumentally unfair, and I expect that Shelton would be entirely justified in dispatching his crack team of aqua-bears to dispose of me. If you're reading this with someone among the target audience, I suspect you'll enjoy it. And it could make for an interesting conversation starter, especially with the cliffhangers that Shelton often uses to end his chapters. This book isn't quite in my wheelhouse, but I enjoyed it anyway, and you might be surprised too.

Caren says

I loved this book, although it is about as quirky as they come and, I suspect, will not appeal to everyone. Just as the title says, it is about a boy and a bear in a boat. Nothing more, nothing less. Why they are in the boat, where the boy was trying to go, why a bear is piloting this boat....well, none of that is explained. Even though this is a children's book, I think many adults will enjoy it as much, if not more, than the middle grade readers at which it is aimed. As an adult, I kept looking at the story, thinking 'what does all of this mean?'. It feels like a sort of metaphor for life itself. Here we are, plunked into this ocean of life, not given much of a map, guided by an affable, but sometimes equally clueless parent/teacher/mentor, heading we know not where, and dealing with endless "unforeseeable anomalies" along the way, as best we can. Does that sound familiar to you, too? The ending comes as a real surprise. As the pages wound down, I kept thinking, "well, he really doesn't have much time left to wrap this up". Here is an author who doesn't conform to expectations though. I have a feeling Mr. Shelton was telling this story with a bit of a chuckle. (I also loved all the Britishisms. Thank goodness they didn't doctor this up for the American market!)

**This book is now on the short list for the Carnegie Medal for children's literature.

Karen says

A boy on his own seeks to cross a body of water from a bear in a small boat. The bear is very proud of his boat and assures the boy that the crossing will take no time at all. Unfortunately, "unforeseeable anomalies" occur and the crossing takes much longer than expected.

I was looking forward to reading this book when I read the description. I thought it would be a quick, fun, and light read that I would be able to recommend to reluctant middle-grade readers. It was a quick and light read, but it was not fun. All the "unforeseeable anomalies" became stressful to read. The boy and the bear ran out of food and water (and by the end of the book, that was the least of their worries).

I don't expect a happy ending for all the books I read, often the best stories don't have a happy ending, but I thought that this book deserved a happy ending because of all the trials and tribulations that the two characters went through. But, I was disappointed. I don't consider the ending to be happy, in fact, I didn't think it was much of an ending at all. I hope that the author didn't leave it as a cliffhanger in hopes of writing a sequel.

Sue Lyle says

I read this because a teacher told me her class of 9-10 year olds loved it and they spent a whole term on the book. I loved it too but can't explain why, it has a mysterious property. A bit like 'Life of Pi' for children without the backstory. The teacher used it for her philosophy sessions and found the children were interested in speculating what the book was meant to be about. Lots came out about the nature of relationships, in particular unequal friendships and interdependence. I also imagine that the 8-10 age group it is aimed at would find it an anger training way to learn about the ocean - the fact that the horizon can just stretch away for days without sight of land, you get a real grasp of the enormity of our seas which cover 70% of the planet and the power of the waves and storms and elements from this book. The fragility of life and the resilience of the characters when facing adversity. Can't wait for my grandson to be old enough to read it. It has made me think and wonder what the author had in mind and what has happened to the boy and the bear and that is a sign of a powerful story. It is post-modernism for children.

Ms. Yingling says

A boy approaches a bear in a boat and asks how long it will take to get "just to the other side". Well, apparently longer than a three-hour tour, because the bear runs into "unforeseen anomalies". The duo drift for days and days, subsisting on bizarre sandwiches and, since this is a British author, tea. They run into storms and giant sea monsters, have to catch fish, and end up on a weirdly antique ship after their smaller boat floats away. When that, too, is destroyed, the two sail off into the sunset with the boy using the bear as a boat.

Strengths: Rather cute in a Paddington Bear sort of way, with illustrations by the author.

Weaknesses: When I looked at the reviews on Goodreads, I was very surprised how much everyone seemed to like this. It just left me shaking my head. There was no point. We have no motivation for the boy to get on the boat with the bear (it's a tiny bit creepy, really), and there is no conclusion. Maybe this is something for much younger children, or British children, and I just didn't get it.

Samuel says

It's fiendishly hard to know what to make of this one. It's bold and audacious, and I don't think it entirely works, but it's hard not to admire its courage.

This is a 300-page book with only two characters. Neither is given a name; they are only referred to as Boy and Bear. The plot is maddeningly obscure in almost all its essential points. The Boy, for reasons left entirely unexplained, asks the Bear to row him across an unnamed body of water, to a destination identified only as "the other side." Their attempts to reach that other side constitute the entirety of the book.

The journey drags on for days and days. They run out of food on multiple occasions. For huge swathes of the book, nothing is happening at all; the Bear rows, and the Boy attempts to find some way in which to occupy himself.

There is a comic book in the boat, left there by a previous passenger. It is in a language the boy doesn't know, but he looks at it over and over again anyway. And...that's it. No explanation is ever given. Similarly, the duo arrive eventually on a Mary Celeste-like abandoned ship. It seems that something is going to happen...but nothing does. The ship simply exists, at least until the boy puts a hole in it while trying to make the bear tea on a gas stove.

And at the end of the book, after a storm has destroyed the rowboat, and the Boy and the Bear are left floating alone in the ocean, the Boy begins rowing the bear, with a ukelele as an oar. And...that's it. Land is never sighted. The journey is never completed. Frankly, I've never read a children's book with less of a conclusion, and the only books of any kind that were even comparable are things like Kafka's *The Castle*.

Parts of the book have a certain humor to them, aided by Shelton's drawings; other parts of it have a hypnotic, meditative quality. The prose, in places, is beautiful. But I don't feel like it ever truly confronts its insularity, or even hints at a reason for the lack of any kind of context. I compare it to something like Anne Ursu's book *Breadcrumbs*, which also leaves any number of things unexplained, but does so because they're things the protagonist has no way to know. Some of the things in *A Boy and A Bear in a Boat* could fit into this category, such as the parts with the abandoned ship, but it's hard to figure a reason the Boy's journey remains so obscure other than trying to be too artsy.

I have no idea who the audience for this book would be; nearly all middle-grade readers will likely be frustrated by the dreamlike, molasses-like pace and the lack of anything like an ending, and adult readers who enjoy Calvino and Kafka and the more inaccessible bits of Eco will probably find that the book doesn't explore the interior of its characters in enough depth to be interesting. But you have to give Shelton credit for trying something different, so I'll give it three stars as a compromise.

Susan says

waiting for godot meets the little prince. I love it so much I can't even tell you.

Andréa says

This is one of the slowest, least interesting, most boring kids' books I've read. Those attributes are even more pronounced and disappointing because the cover leads one to expect an exciting adventure. The illustrations are excellent, and I would love to read a picture book by Shelton, but I don't think I'll be recommending his novel to anyone. It felt much like a text you'd be required to read for a college philosophy class, not like a novel aimed at middle schoolers... and it held my attention about as well as my college philosophy texts did, which is to say not very well. As for the ending, or lack thereof -- while I myself prefer happy endings, I know some stories can't end happily. However, I think every story should at least have a resolution of SOME kind, especially a story for kids.

I appreciate that Shelton experimented with something outside the norm in this, but this type of book would probably work better for adult fiction, or even YA, than for the middle-school demographic.

Joe Humphreys says

Of all the Carnegie shortlisted books, A Boy and A Bear in a Boat is the one aimed at the youngest audience. It is a deceptively simple tale and the nuts and bolts of the plot are pretty much covered by the title. It's the sort of book that reviewers would say raises a smile, call 'charming' or 'quirky' and then not even contemplate garlanding with the highest accolades. Yet there is more to Dave Shelton's tale than this. As young an audience as this is aimed at, it is arguably the most philosophical and unpretentiously wise of the books on this year's shortlist.

No, I haven't gone off my rocker I assure you. The reason this works so well is because it is truly unique in being so unconventional, yet warm, gentle and engaging with it. The novel is essentially a two hander between its titular characters, but names are never revealed. The bear is a masterpiece of deadpan surrealism: depicted in such mundane, humanist terms that not once does it at all seem unusual he's a talking bear, never mind rowing a boat. Where are they supposed to be sailing to? Hardly seems to matter: the boy simply asks to be taken to the 'other side' when he gets on board...

This isn't quite Waiting for Godot. Stuff does happen as they sail across the ocean blue. But, for me, the incidents in themselves are very much of secondary importance, dramatic as some of them seem to be. What is most important is their experiences, shared (they're together on a boat in an endless stretch of sea) or otherwise (they both react to this in rather different ways). The setting is key, but only in so far as it allows the book to explore just exactly what life is, what it means and how we should live it.

I apologise if that sounds trite, but these are issues that philosophers grapple with, and this is very much a philosophical novel. And yes, it is one for both its intended audience and readers in general to appreciate. Trust me: read it and all will become clear. In wilfully jettisoning plotting conventions, yet weaving a compelling tale all the same, this book succeeds in having a strong head and a sturdy heart. To not put too fine a point on it, Shelton has achieved something rather remarkable.

Sarah Booth says

2.5 stars

This is the oddest existentialism story for kids. It had a "No Exit" (Sartre?) feeling to it and made me quite anxious. I thought it was going to be a quick sweet story, which it sort of is, but then I found the ending far too unresolved for my taste. It's also a lesson in minimalism and making due with less I suppose, but quite odd. I am never getting into a row boat with a bear unless I can see the shores the whole time.

C. says

I feel as if I should review this in some way, and I don't exactly know how to review it. This was a read aloud with my 5.5 year old. I sort of ended up getting it 'accidentally', i.e., I thought I had ordered other things on hold, but this was one of the ones that came in and once he'd seen it he was interested.

It's a very quiet story in many ways, moving from mundane event to somewhat less mundane event, and without a clear-cut ending. Another reviewer said Joe Vs. the Volcano, and I can see that, precisely. The five star rating was my son's rating for it. He enjoyed it far more than I expected he would, but he is into

adventure stories right now, and this does qualify as that.

I would probably typically suggest it for a slightly older audience, certainly if they're reading it themselves they would need to be older, but there wasn't anything offensive for a 5 year old, just some slightly scary moments that a child who has watched The Lion King or another Disney fairy tale can easily handle.

Anna says

This is a book aimed at 8-11 year olds, and I suspect, boys. However the essentially existentialist narrative may attract an older audience who would see it as a metaphor for life and experience. In simple terms it is about a boy and a bear on a boat. There is no explanation why, where or when and the ending is left open. The bear, (the captain) does not always inspire confidence, they experience various anomalies and unexplained problems but, but together they struggle on. For me the strongest feature of this book was the beautiful artwork, which I hope made it into the paperback edition. This read a little like a cross between Samuel Becket's 'Waiting for Godot' and 'The Life of Pi' but for 8 year olds. I would have liked a little more humour, I found the pace unbalanced and the boy a little irritating. I have a problem with any book that uses the word 'boring' as I spend some much time persuading children not to use it, but I suppose that is my personal hang up.

All in all, beautifully illustrated, quirky, unusual and a book I may have to brood over before I settle on a final star rating, but my initial impression is that I think this would have been better on the 2013 Greenaway shortlist than on the Carnegie. The image text cohesion was great, the text itself, less satisfying; I wanted to turn the page to see the next illustration rather than read what happened next. For me it wasn't in the same league as David Almond's 'My Name is Mina' (Carnegie 2012 shortlist). Having said that I can see that some people would see this as a 5*, so try it and see!

Chris says

It seemed to be just one episode of a longer story so it didn't have a proper beginning or ending, it was all just part of the middle. There was no way of knowing what had gone on before or what would happen after. And, actually, the boy didn't have much of a clue about what was going on now.

Is it possible to write a simple, abstract fable largely about a character being bored that is not itself boring? That's the question I kept asking myself as I read this book. For a large part of the story nothing much happens, just the boy sitting in the boat with nothing to do while the bear contentedly rows, sleeps, eats, and has tea. There was no explanation for this situation and no conclusion, it just is. Yet something kept me captivated and reading. And that's not the entire story--there is a plot and eventful things do happen--but it's largely a story of isolation and inactivity. Part Zen, part Existentialism, and part *Joe Versus the Volcano*. It's not the kind of story you can really think about or analyze, it's one you feel; I don't know what I liked about it or why, but I did. And that's enough.

Anastasia Antonova says

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