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Caldecott Medalist Chris Raschka makes his dazzling debut as a fiction writer

Now that the whole thing is over (and we all survived!), I can tell you what happened.

Picture this for a second. Rock wall six inches on my left. Sheer cliff hundreds of feet down on my right, my best friend Norman in front of me, mumbling something, and my mom behind me saying, "Step, step, step." EEEEEYAAAAAH! Next time my mom bugs me about sitting in front of the computer too much, I'm going to say, "Thanks, I prefer it where the near-death experiences are virtual!"

No, seriously, this story is about Norman and about how he grows and learns stuff. Uses his imagination. Observes things. Like his dad, who is so devoted to . . . money! Like how his dad is mixed up with weird creeps of the underworld. All over the world!

Why, why are grown-ups so insane?

That's exactly the question that Norman, Anna and Emma (the twins), and I, Leonard, try to answer. And with the help of Norman's new tutor, Balthazar Birdsong (also fairly nuts), we nearly do it, too.

Seriously, Norman! Details

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From Reader Review Seriously, Norman! for online ebook

Antonio Catanzarite says

Was very childish and goofy which was uncalled for seeing that it was a 350 page book. The story was pushed and shoved in several directions adding new random characters and several new problems. The beginning was ok, but the author lost all of his story halfway through the book. I suppose the closing was decent, but nothing to brag about. In fact, I would label this entire book as decent, but nothing to brag about. The characters make jokes that are so unfunny and random that it's hard to place it in the "Humor Genre". I suppose the characters were consistent, but that's not what a story is about. They begin the them doing something extraordinary and out of place. The title is one letter away from "normal" just like the bland plot line that the character have constructed. The urgency of the story was also out of place. Of course there was a problem that required fixing, but the work that was preventing the issue was exaggerated to the point of "What is the point of trying?". The best thing about this book were the "shower thoughts" that would make the reader stop and think about what the author is trying to get across to you. I spent time thinking over the inspiring writing. In the end, it wasn't that bad, but not something you would read again, but just once for fun.

Josiah says

“Observation performed merely on its own is no more than what a machine can do—a surveillance camera, for instance. And imagination on its own, practiced by itself for too long, can cut you off from the world. You might wander away, like a hermit to a cave, becoming only a spirit to the rest of humanity. However, if you remain in the world, and you train yourself to combine observation and imagination in proper proportion...then you may change the world itself.”

?Balthazar Birdsong, *Seriously, Norman!*, P. 99

This book caught me somewhat off guard. I've learned what to expect from Chris Raschka as an award-winning author and illustrator of picture books, but had little sense of what he was going to attempt in *Seriously, Norman!*, his debut novel. While I could have ventured a few guesses as to what the book might be like, I probably would not have ventured to speculate that it would end up being something of an updated version of Norton Juster's classic *The Phantom Tollbooth*, a moralistic fable conceived with the goal of helping kids see that educating oneself in all areas of life can be a splendid and exciting undertaking. That is, however, just what we find in *Seriously, Norman!*, in addition to a story that shows excellent flashes of humor and a plot that builds on what has happened in preceding chapters. If Chris Raschka chooses to continue writing novels in addition to picture books, I believe he may have a bright future in the medium.

After failing a ballyhooed standardized test at school, twelve-year-old Norman's concerned (if scatterbrained) parents hire a tutor for their son, to help him bring up his grade when he takes the same test again next year. The tutor who happens to win the job is the flighty and undeniably brilliant Balthazar Birdsong, an eccentric freelance educator whose quirky (and quirky really is the operative word here) approach to learning revives within Norman some interest in his studies. Promising to add to his reservoir of knowledge by reading incrementally through the dictionary at a pace designed to complete the Z's just as the next big test rolls around in a year, Norman is unprepared for the journey on which this deliberate foray into education takes him and his friends, twins Anna and Emma and Norman's best friend, Leonard. As Norman adds to his personal knowledge, realizations about his life with his parents and the world around them that previously had passed him by completely now become quite obvious, and this leads Norman down more than a few

unexpected avenues of exploration. What is one to do when one's father is a seller of dangerous military equipment, putting his hand to some shady dealings with foreign government officials, dealings that may not even be legal? How is one supposed to keep on learning at a steady pace when big-time adventures, both local and international, continue to spring up around every turn? Norman will have his chance to confront his father's backdoor weapons dealings and try to set everything right, but Balthazar Birdsong will be there, too, all the way, making sure Norman never forgets that the perpetual process of learning encompasses so much more than the hours spent inside the classroom five days a week. To continue learning as a lifelong endeavor is to hug the whole world and all it contains closely to oneself, to love its mystery and majesty and unexplainable happenings and delicious warmth for what it is and to keep it all stored in one's memory, not because it will appear on some written test, but because to experience and retain the joy of the knowledge of everything is to lead a full life, to know that life for what it has to offer and enjoy the limited number of days it can be enjoyed for as long as they last. This is the greatest lesson that Balthazar Birdsong has to teach Norman; and I think, by the turn of the book's final page, he has come to truly understand it.

"You are all perfectly correct in your implications that we would be safer if we stayed home in our rooms...But we would also be duller, stupider, and, finally, sadder. If you want to avoid danger, don't get born. Once you are born, make something of it!"

—Balthazar Birdsong, P. 245

To me, the most valuable sections of *Seriously, Norman!* are the philosophical discussions that Balthazar Birdsong departs on occasionally while teaching Norman and his friends, flights of thought and critique that carry some impressive truths. On pages 188 through 189, Balthazar talks about the growth of humanity as a whole, suggesting that mankind is still only at an early developmental age in learning how to control its own temper, strength and ability to be a danger to itself. After pointing out that nothing is "more terrible" than a three-year-old with a stick, Balthazar then says, "The human family as a whole, I should say, is still a three-year-old with a stick." There are several other ideas in this section that deserve a closer look as part of the experience of reading the whole story. On page 246, Balthazar observes the following about societal oversensitivity to land boundaries and property ownership: "Henry David Thoreau, one of our great countrymen...rued the day when our country would be so parceled and boundaried that a stroll through the neighboring hills would become impossible due to individual ownership of the land. Private property! The bane of modern man. Every one of us so determined to secure his or her own piece of petty ground. And what have you got? A piece of petty ground. What have you lost? The world!" Balthazar Birdsong has an effective way of stating the issues so we can't just forget about or ignore them, and it helps to educate our opinions as well as Norman's.

There are some praiseworthy attributes to *Seriously, Norman!*, especially as a first novel, and I look forward to what other stories Chris Raschka has to tell. There's a pretty good chance that I would give one and a half stars to this book.

Barbara says

After twelve-year-old Norman Normann does poorly on the annual Amalgamated Academic Independent City Schools Test, his parents hire a tutor to prepare him for next year's test. But the tutor, Balthazar Birdsong, surprisingly doesn't arrive with a battery of test preparation exercises and reading and responding samples. Instead, he suggests that Norman study the dictionary, mastering one letter of the alphabet each week. He also takes Norman and his friends on field trips across the city. Clearly, there is more to be learned from being immersed in the dictionary than might be expected, and actually those brief definitions of words from various sections of the dictionary were my favorite parts of the book. While Norman is immersing

himself in letters, he grows increasingly concerned about his father who earns a living by selling bombers to some rather shady characters. Despite his efforts to get his father to change his career, Norman ends up having to fly to Singapore to bring his father back home. Clearly, Norman and his friends have their feet more firmly planted on the ground than either of his parents. Despite some of the humorous use of the new words Norman is acquiring and his obvious intelligence, I became so annoyed with his father's selfishness that it was hard to enjoy the book at times. Then, too, there are plenty of inside jokes and references that are likely to float right over the middle grade readers that are the book's intended audience; for instance, Orman Norman raves about how he fell in love with Julie Christie in *The Sound of Music* when he means Julie Andrews, mixing up three films, *Mary Poppins*, *Doctor Zhivago*, and *The Sound of Music*. While there are many amusing moments as well as a serious point being made about education in this title, the points could have been made in a much shorter number of pages.

Claire McNerney says

I loved *Seriously, Norman!* so, so much! I loved how his tutor made him read the dictionary (something that I once did rather obsessively during a long car trip) and how all of the words and definitions fit into the story. I actually learned a lot of interesting words from reading this book, like *infundibular*, which means funnel shaped, and *algogenic*, which means causing pain, that I probably wouldn't have learned in my normal life. If you love words, then this is the book for you. I wholeheartedly recommend it for any logophiles or bibliophiles out there. Even if words aren't your thing, I think that everyone could find something to love in this entrancing book.

Debra Goodman says

The story starts when Norman bombs an entrance exam to choice high schools and his parents hire a quirky older tutor, Barthazar Birdsong, to help him study for the following year. Barthazar's approach is for Norman to read the dictionary (a letter each week) and take some trips around the city and the world. In the meantime, Norman and his three friends worry about his dad's profession - selling bombers. No joke.

This books started of slow and then went nowhere slowly. It tries to be funny - along the lines of *Harriet the Spy* or *Phantom Tollbooth* - but the plot is entirely unplausable and it's not funny or twisty enough to be farce. There's very little action and 342 pages. The characters are entirely underdeveloped - you don't really get to know them. I kept expecting plot twists to explain the unplausable bits, but...

On top of that, the book is preachy and hard hitting with the message. "All this suggests that the world of knowledge already exists, as if in an enormous warehouse. Whoever comes along and gathers the most knowledge, filling up his shopping cart the fullest, is deemed the smartest. Whoever, etc, the least, etc. the dumbest." Norman only felt that his shopping cart of knowledge had a 'couple of fifty-cent bags of chips and a small cucumber in it." Perhaps one of the funnier lines but a "banking" view of learning. When the characters use the dictionary terms, they have to translate - rather than building context - because they end up being artificial language.

Raschka should stick to picture books - or get a good editor next time.

Josh says

The characters in this book are really fun. Norman Normann has a nice character arc. It is very interesting to watch him grow as a person during the year chronicled in this book. The author handles this in a subtle way and does a good job of showing Norman change rather than telling you that he did. The writing is also very offbeat and clever in parts. Ostensibly, Norman is preparing for a big standardized test during the year, and I really liked how his "tutor" prepared him for that test (namely by helping Norman to pay attention to the world around him and learn constantly from what is happening rather than just focusing on what he was "supposed" to learn). With all of these positive things, it is a bit surprising that I didn't like the book more, but something just didn't jell for me with the plot and I didn't really get that "I need to find out what happens next" feeling I get with my favorite books.

Kim says

This is the story of Norman Normann, who, with the help of his friends and his amazing tutor Balthazar Birdsong, sets out to save his father (a used-bomber salesman) from bad karma. Sound confusing? It is. But in a fun way for the most part. While it took me about 60 pages to really get into the rhythm of the book, I'm glad I stuck with it. I was torn between 3 and 4 stars on the rating, only because the quiriness of the story sometimes crosses over into cartoonishness. I don't think this is going to have wide appeal, but there are certainly those kids who will appreciate the zaniness and will enjoy reading the dictionary and learning about cloud formations and kite structure along with Norman, Leonard, Anna, and Emma.

Becky says

I could not finish this book. Norman fails the test to get into a "super special school", so his mother hires a tutor-Mr. Balthazar, whose only assignment is the weekly reading of a letter in the dictionary. Norman consequently finds opportunities during the week to use his new-found vocabulary. Mr. Raschka spends way too much time with flowery descriptions and Norman's musings--it took nine pages for Norman to get over not doing well on his test. I forced myself to read 125 pages and nothing of significance or particular interest happens, and there is no hint that anything will. The author should stick to picture books, where he shines.

Elizabeth says

I have always enjoyed the messages in Chris Raschka's books so I was happy to see that he has forayed into chapter books. This was a great one!

His writing reminded me of Roald Dahl and Louis Sachar. The story is about Norman Normann who needs to do better on a test so his parents hire a tutor for him named Balthazar Birdsong. Through the story we discover that Norman is heavily burdened by the absence of his father AND the line of work his father is in. Mr. Birdsong along with the Quadrumvirate (Norman and his three friends, Anna, Emma, and Leonard) hatch a plan to do something about Norman's father. Along the way, Balthazar teaches all the kids some important lessons--to observe, to imagine, to act. He explains that you can do this through travel and/or exploring where you are. Also, Balthazar is all about boosting one's vocabulary and enjoying language. Norman discovers that learning is natural and fun. He also learns that even kids can be instrumental in change. This book was silly and wonderful.

Handd51 says

What a lucky day when Scholastic handed me an ARC of this book - it is outstanding. We could hardly expect less from Caldecott winner Chris Raschka, except this is his first novel for young people. The publisher lists this for 4th-9th grades, which is about right - except I think it will more commonly be popular at the 6th-7th grade level. The book is funny, exciting, interesting and has an underlying (not-so-subtle) anti-testing theme. The story opens as Norman heads out to take the entrance exam for a posh private school in NYC (at which he doesn't do well), and it ends a year later in the same place. In the meantime, the Normanns (yes, his real name is Norman Normann, and his mother is Norma Normann and his father is Orman Normann, so you get the general idea) hire a tutor for Norman to be sure he can pass the second test. Balthazar Birdsong, tutor, is a bit eccentric - and a great tutor. He sets Norman to read the dictionary, one letter each week, and Norman discovers interesting insights in the words of each week. There is an element of spy novel here, and family feel-good after family-feel-not-so-good - and we are confident at the end that Norman will pass the test. Get ready to laugh-out-loud and enjoy the ride.

Michelle says

I won an ARC copy of this book but because it took some extra time to show up I ended up with a regular copy which means I got the illustrations too! Seriously, Norman is the silly story of Norman Normann maturing over a year. I enjoyed the word play and the characters very much. They were well developed as were the relationships among them. I loved the word play at first but the more I read it became a little tiresome. Probably could have been a bit shorter for the writing style used. I laughed my way through it and appreciated the positive messages about life, family, and confidence. I would easily recommend this to anyone looking for a book to make them laugh but think at the same time. Based on this book I would love to read more by Chris Raschka.

Completely unrelated but my copy of the book has the cover flipped backwards, don't know if this is the way all the books were bound or just a fluke but it was interesting.

Sherry Elswick says

At first I thought this a clever story to help expand my kid's vocabulary in a clever way so that he didn't realize that was the ulterior motive. However, nothing happens in this story. The mom is depicted as dumb. The father is boorish. He sells used bomber planes and makes jokes that people just love to drop bombs on one another. Not sure if Chris Raschka is going for satire here or what. If so, he doesn't quite pull it off.

The tutor that Norman's parents hire is interesting. He makes some really astounding assessments how imagination and observation need to be balanced in order to be effective, which is great, but the tutor's sentiments get lost in a convoluted narrative structure that complicates more so than illuminates.

My kids and I didn't finish reading this book. We couldn't endure it anymore.

Kelli Gleiner says

This was a fun read! Norman meets his cool but weird new tutor, works his way through the dictionary, discovers his father's profession, tries to get his dad to stop doing what he does (no spoiler here) and sell shoes instead, and has adventures with his friends and family.

It's a great adventure story, and with the dictionary entries and trips around the world, it has a lot to teach children and adults.

I was lucky to have met Chris Raschka this past weekend, and told him that I enjoyed the book and wondered what was next for Norman. He left the book open-ended just in case he wanted to write a sequel, but has no plans as of yet for a second book.

I do wonder why he said that the book is for kids 12 and up. The only thing I can see as being questionable is when they discover a certain four-lettered word in the "s" section of the dictionary... but I can recall being very intrigued by those words in 5th grade (I mean VERY intrigued- George Carlin would have been proud of my 5th grade class).

Tim says

Let's be honest: this would not have seen the light of day without Raschka's name on it (and/or some SERIOUS editing). This is an overlong slog of a read that is far too in love with its own sense of humor...and that might be excusable if that sense of humor were funny.

I gave this 80 pages the first time I tried to read it. I was sick of the lame jokes by page 20, and every character in the book annoyed me by page 30. I love me some silly middle grade and tween books. That's my sense of humor (check out the other ratings and few reviews on Goodreads)...this was just--well (sorry Chris) dumb.

The plot (which is also quite lame) is secondary to the humor and the over abundance of QUIRK! Every character has a quirk or three, and they hammer them home with repetition of the repetition.

This is, to be honest, a complete waste of trees. Even the bits and bytes of the eBooks are wasted.

Edie says

Reminiscent a bit of The Phantom Tollbooth, Norman Normann has two clueless parents, one, his mother, overwhelmingly nurturing in a vacant sort of way, and the other, his dad, consumed with his desire to make money by selling reused bombers. Interested in making sure Norman does well in the world they hire a tutor who has a very novel approach to education. There are lots of puns here, mysteries about Norman's father's true activities and how to get him to stop being in the bomber business (and perhaps committing a crime) and suggestions about new ways to look at the world. Not for every reader, but for those with a good sense of humor and a willingness to jump into a story and suspend disbelief, just go with the flow, which is what Norman and his Haaaawoooo friend Leonard would do. You'll also improve your vocabulary and learn to order hot chocolate midd shlawg.
