



The Book of Ralph

John McNally

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All of us need a Ralph in our lives.

Chicago, 1978. Hank Boyd, a solid B+ student, a good kid, wants eighth grade to be his special year. But when Ralph, an oddball troublemaker who 's been held back twice, gets the idea that he and Hank are pals, Hank's year devolves into an odyssey as frightening as it is hilarious.

John McNally, acclaimed author of *Troublemakers*, deftly portrays the astonishing, sometimes terrifying world of adolescence in 1970s America: The adult world becomes increasingly untrustworthy, the economy plummets, and families seem to be falling apart, yet the two boys manage to create their own small moments of transcendence.

At once wary and full of wonder, Hank and Ralph will win your heart with their outrageous, poignant, and occasionally scary antics -- and they will teach you something about the ties that bind us together, hold us back, and redeem us.

The Book of Ralph Details

Date : Published May 1st 2005 by Free Press (first published 2004)

ISBN : 9780743257770

Author : John McNally

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Young Adult, Humor, Comedy

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From Reader Review The Book of Ralph for online ebook

Ace McGee says

The majority of this book is an amusing tale of an unlikely childhood friendship taking place in Chicago in the 1970s. It features the misadventures of the narrator Hank and his delinquent buddy Ralph. The two-years older Ralph is constantly presenting various hijinks and money making schemes to Hank who is never anxious to be involved. While Ralph never pressures Hank into his schemes he never fully understands why Hank refuses to participate. Ralph's idea of "beating up fourth grade Christmas Carolers and taking their tip money" is just morally wrong to Hank. When Hank refuses to go along with this idea Ralph concedes that "yeah, they'll probably cry, tell their parents, and we'd get caught."

The last of the book entitled, The Future, 2001, it's a completely new story. 20 years have passed, life has happened, good and bad, and Hank and Ralph not only meet up again but become roommates. This is certainly the best part of the book, the best story, and has the most character development and growth. It's enjoyable to watch Ralph, as a grown man, but with the same slightly twisted view of reality. He's found his place in the world, the question is, can Hank find his?

Matt says

Lent to me by a student, this book sat on the floor (the floor, even!) of my office for almost two years while I puttered around and read other things. And then, finally, I decided I'd read it, and it's pretty good-- it's another coming-of-age story, this time shorter on the music than I usually go for, but invested with some other goodness. Mostly, the book's successes are drawn from the kind of crisp observations that are maybe more often funny than illuminating, but only by a little bit. There are lots of these small really satisfying moments, like the pop when the bubble pops, before it hits your face.

The shape overall and chapter by chapter (it's practically a book of stories with the same characters) and overall kind of lacks shape and definition. It's the second "literate" book I've read lately that makes the case that something is "real" because it doesn't cohere, and that all the clues were not pointing toward an overarching narrative, but instead just reveal our yearning for the same. It's weird, this sort of mainstreaming-of-suspicion of narrative, in books that otherwise seem pretty orthodox, and it makes for a weirdly unsatisfying read, in the end-- I mean, these ARE fictions, whatever their characters might feel about the reality of their lives from their vantage point.

But this is all a long way around to say I thought this was often good, but overall it felt longer than it was in pure page# terms, because I'm not sure it was cumulative, just a vehicle for the jokes and spit-takes.

Rikki Saffell says

spoiler

this is never my favorite kind of book. it's a whole lot of unconnected almost rambling facts from childhood, then...when the story starts to actually be interesting...it just stops.

no ending, no resolution...just mid-story drops off. grrrrrr....

the entire rest of the book could have been 50 pgs and the actual story begins at part 3. this section of the

story is great...and could have potentially gone for another 200 pages.

Martin Gehrke says

I could tell it wanted to be a mix of comedy and philosophy but both seemed to almost hit their target. Fun read though, better than your average first encounter book.

Megan says

I liked this book perfectly fine up until the end, which is set in a different time decade than the rest of the book and just seems to throw everything off-kilter.

I think basically everybody knew somebody like Ralph growing up. Pretty much everybody knew somebody like a lot of the characters in this book. Even set 30-40 years ago, some things just stay the same with time, and one of those is adolescence - confusion over the opposite sex, a conviction that you must be a pervert because you have all these weird sexual feelings, a feeling of complete lack of control over your surroundings. John McNally is really good at evoking that confusion and all around odd period in life. The situations his characters find themselves in start off ordinary and sort of balloon up like a Simpsons episode, getting kind of crazy as it goes on, but it's pretty good anyway because you still feel tied to the characters.

But that ending section. Man. I just didn't like it. I didn't want to know what happened in that section. I liked seeing the characters the way they were in the rest of the book. For some reason it just depressed me, got me down. I'd have really liked the book much more if it had ended with the chapter "A Diagram of the Future."

Peter Derk says

The first third was a blast. Then it gets more maudlin. It was still a good book, but it started with such a bang that when things changed gears a bit, it felt like something was missing.

It's got a great element to storytelling though, something Mark Richard talked about, which is stories about people trying to beat the system. He said we've got plenty of some kinds of stories, plenty boy meets girl stories, but it's always intriguing to watch someone try and beat the system.

Brandon Will says

A celebration of the oddballs who can only live as the oddballs they are. It's about how creepy getting older is; all of us haunted by these children and clueless adolescents we once were and never totally left behind. It's about how amusing it all is, and how some people never really change, and the beauty that co-exists with the tragedy of that.

Then you find yourself a grown-up, after all these oddball adventures, and maybe it's a little bit hard to believe. Deeply funny, incredibly observational and searching.

Laugh-out-loud-on-the-el funny.

Michele says

Good Enough to Read Twice

This is a fantastic read--a real page-turner. Congratulations to John McNally for being a gifted storyteller and for putting this collection together in an interesting and creative manner. He has presented a true time capsule complete with scenery, music, language and costume.

Ralph is the boy we all knew--an attention hound dressed in a flannel shirt, who spent a lot of time in the school hallways on his way to the dean's office. Hank, however, who tells his stories from the gray, "who am I" world of suburban Chicago in the 70s, is the boy who faded into the woodwork. He's the boy who was up for anything to make his world a little more exciting and often didn't have a choice when it came to dealing with his eccentric father and, of course, Ralph. Each character, including Hank's sister Kelly and even the lady next door, Mrs. Rybecki, who suffers from Tourette's syndrome, are keenly developed and highly entertaining.

When we meet Hank in the future, he's like the guy at your 25th class reunion who everyone wants to know. Even though he's down on his luck and must resort to a life in Ralph's domain, he's interesting, good looking sensitive and . . . funny. Somehow you just know that everything is A-OK with Hank.

I loved this book.

Mark says

I really enjoyed this novel, in large part due to the familiar setting in the first half of the story; the late 70's on the southwest side of Chicago. Hank is in 8th grade, a decent student with a good future who is hopelessly drawn to Ralph, a chronic troublemaker who is two years older, but held back twice, so he's in Hank's class. Like a moth drawn to a flame, Hank can't resist Ralph, even though he knows it's in his best interests. I'm almost exactly Ralph's age, and grew up in the south suburbs of Chicago, so this story really clicked with me. At times in the first half it feels a little cliché (almost like something from Jean Shepard), but the writing is realistic, the characters are great, and the story is often hilarious.

In the second half of the novel it is seventeen years later, and the two boys are reunited by coincidence. The story line that develops is a little depressing, and the scenario a little bit of a stretch, but it is entertaining. The past and present sections of the book are separated by a short interlude that takes us to the time when Hank and Ralph met, which I thought was brilliant.

No matter what your age, chances are good you will identify with one of the characters in this novel. If you don't mind a little grim, black humor to season your fiction, this is for you.

Martin says

The Book of Ralph is the story of Hank, an eighth-grader living in the southwest side of Chicago. Hank narrates a series of stories that find him bumping into a dubious older kid named Ralph who has failed a couple of grades. These stories are funny, touching, and sad by turns as Hank navigates the treacherous world of eighth grade. Hank is a lovable narrator whose parents are preoccupied by marriage and financial problems, giving him enough space to wander Chicago with Ralph. Together, they find fun and trouble. I loved the ending of this book, especially, because it depicts the two boys as adults in a really satisfying way that resonates. Very entertaining, very well-written, I recommend it for readers who appreciate humor mixed with gravitas.

Sue says

I didn't grow up in the seventies; I was already married and a mom. I didn't grow up in Chicago, though I live there now. But I identified with this book for two reasons. First of all, I knew a Ralph a long time ago. In fourth grade, he was the class outcast and I kissed him in front of our principal's office. I don't know why. Secondly, John McNally has this eye for detail that's universal. Details like the smell and whssss of a freshly opened can of beer, the angst of junior high, the embarrassment caused by a parent, sibling rivalry and the journey of just trying to find out who the hell you are. And I'm giving this five stars because it's been years since I actually chuckled then laughed at loud while reading the first two or three pages.

Naomi V says

i wouldn't have picked this book up, just because of the title. but my husband bought it for me and it turned out to be a pretty interesting read. it's set on the southwest side of chicago (and nearby suburbs) and there's mention of many 'landmarks' that i recognized. ralph and hank are interesting characters, too. i think everybody knew a ralph in school and will recognize him in this book. (i identified with hank a bit: "Politeness, I knew, would be the death of me.")

this isn't a novel, so much as a series of connected short stories. i also liked what the author did with the time line. this book was a pleasant surprise!

Kelly says

Since I spent eighth grade year at the same time, I could relate to the era. I knew people just like Hank and Ralph (and Kenny and Norm), and it made me wonder where they are now. I could honestly say I laughed out loud in several places throughout the novel. Great grip on the characters.

I read that some people who read the book did not like the ending, because the book fastforwarded to the twenty-first century, but I loved it. Life doesn't necessarily go as you think it will when you are in middle school. My favorite scene in their adulthood is when Hank comes face to face with Ralph's mom and realizes that she always thought he was the bad influence.

Definitely a book I will keep on my shelf.

Dave says

Zayre. My mom used to take me and my sister there when we were kids. And we would lose ourselves in the racks of clothes, much to the dismay of my mom. Zayre was Target before Target. And it's mentioned in this book. Perhaps it's what this book did best for me, conjuring up childhood memories. The Book of Ralph, set just a few miles down the road in the Southwest burbs of Chicago, is a rambling, plotless rendezvous of interconnected snippets in the life of 13 year old Hank Boyd. He is relatively normal despite the efforts of his family to the contrary. His counterpart, Ralph, is an enigma; an academic failure, yet abruptly inventive and borderline talented. And quite the schemer. What unfolds is tale after tale of Hank's life, Ralph popping up seemingly at every turn. Reading the story was very much like engaging the ignition on the family road wagon without any semblance of a mapped out route or plan and just driving to see what the world offers up. But there is charm in that which bears no known terminus; Gump's feather in the wind and box of chocolates. Maybe a metaphor for those of us who can reach back into those 1970s in our thoughts and say, "I had no idea this would lead to...". And for that, I enjoyed its arbitrary nature.

Rachel says

Ralph is the oldest 8th grader at Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Junior High, having been left back twice. His only friend is the narrator and main character Hank (also in the 8th grade but two years younger), and, unsurprisingly to the reader if not to Hank, Hank's only friend is Ralph. Ralph is on his way to becoming a minor criminal, though many of his schemes originate with his low-life cousins Kenny and Norm, and Hank is an average kid with poor social skills who thinks he's above average but unappreciated. The story takes place mostly in 1978, with a flashback to 1975 that explains the genesis of the boys' friendship, and a flashforward to 2001, which demonstrates that this isn't really a coming-of-age novel in that no one here ever really matures; they just get older.

I'm currently in the process of giving away or selling a lot of my books and when I ran across this one, which I first read six or seven years ago, I remembered liking it but nothing else about it. I decided to re-read it before getting rid of it, and even though I just finished it yesterday, I'm already beginning to forget most of what happened. I would still say that I like it and that it's funny in a mordant way, but it's missing *something* and I can't put my finger on what that is. Half-heartedly recommended.
