



The Year of Billy Miller

Kevin Henkes

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A 2014 Newbery Honor Book

A *New York Times* Bestseller

Award-winning, nationally bestselling author Kevin Henkes introduces second-grader Billy Miller in this fast-paced and funny story about friendship, sibling rivalry, and elementary school. *The Year of Billy Miller* includes black-and-white art by Kevin Henkes and is perfect for fans of the Ramona books; Frindle, by Andrew Clements; and the Clementine series.

The *New York Times* declared: "Henkes's delightful story is restrained and vivid . . . forgoing the overdramatic or zany, it shows the substance, warmth and adaptability of beautifully common family love." When Billy Miller has a mishap at the statue of the Jolly Green Giant at the end of summer vacation, he ends up with a big lump on his head. What a way to start second grade, with a lump on your head! As the year goes by, though, Billy figures out how to navigate elementary school, how to appreciate his little sister, and how to be a more grown up and responsible member of the family and a help to his busy working mom and stay-at-home dad. Newbery Honor author and Caldecott Medalist Kevin Henkes delivers a short, satisfying, laugh-out-loud-funny school and family story that features a diorama homework assignment, a school poetry slam, cancelled sleepovers, and epic sibling temper tantrums. This is a perfect short novel for the early elementary grades.

The Year of Billy Miller Details

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Author : Kevin Henkes

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From Reader Review The Year of Billy Miller for online ebook

Alison says

Can you come of age as a second grader? Yes -- in small but meaningful ways. Kevin Henkes captures a perfect handful of them in this heartwarming and utterly wonderful book about a boy named Billy Miller who has normal kid worries as he starts (and, some months later, ends) his second grade year. He worries maybe he's not smart enough for the second grade. He worries that his teacher doesn't know he's a nice kid. But he hopes a lot too -- hopes he can succeed at staying up all night for the first time ever; hopes he can help his dad get back to making art again; hopes he can WOW his mom with the poem he writes about her.

This is an honest but hopeful book about a kid's early experiences with taking responsibility, experiencing peer pressure, and seeing his ideas become complex and USEFUL enough to inspire not just kids but grown-ups. The events that inspire Billy's growth in these areas are what adults like to think of as "small moments" but to Billy Miller, as to ANY second grader, these things feel BIG -- big enough to make the whole year feel like it could just be "the year of Billy Miller."

Kids and adults will both be drawn in by the sensitivity and care of Henkes' characterizations -- as always, he allows the reader to glimpse the private, inner thoughts of a kid whose mind feels wholly familiar and whose small "coming of age" feels, in broad strokes, like a carbon copy of our own.

This is a chapter book that fluent readers will be able to tackle, but I especially fill with glee at the thought of using it as a read-aloud. Either way it is a book worth sharing with all of the second grader(s) in your life - and the 1st and 3rd graders too.

Rachael says

Read it while getting an extremely painful tattoo and liked it anyway. Review to come.

ETA: here is the actual review!

When I attend ALA, I usually approach author signings in one of two frames of mind. Sometimes - probably the majority of times - I am diffident and humble, giving them a quick "thank you" and getting out of their hair. This year, however, I went with the other approach, which I'll call "wild-eyed fangirl." I hugged Laura Amy Schlitz and took a picture in her hat. I bumbled and enthused at Anne Ursu. And when I finally got to the front of the Keven Henkes line, I burst out with, "THANK YOU FOR WRITING SO RESPECTFULLY ABOUT THE EMOTIONAL LIVES OF CHILDREN."

Mr. Henkes looked a bit bewildered and murmured something noncommittal, but I went away satisfied, because really, he needed to be thanked. I can't think of anyone else writing today who approaches the inner lives of five, six, and seven-year-olds as if he's writing Mrs. Dalloway. As I noted a couple of weeks ago, the emotional authenticity of Penny and Her Marble puts it at the top of my Newbery list for this year. In 2011's *Junonia*, he portrayed a certain shade of disappointment so honestly that it backfired and made a lot of people dislike the character. (Not me, though - I was that quiet, slightly spoiled ten-year-old living a charmed but melancholy life. Thanks again, Kev!) No matter the age group, Henkes groks kids.

So I was pleased to see that, with his newest novel, Henkes is stepping into the early chapter book arena for the first time. *The Year of Billy Miller* is just that - a year in the life of a second-grade boy. Many of Henkes'

novels defy conventional plot summaries, and I think the back flap copy on this one really misses the mark. "Laugh-out-loud funny!" it shouts. "Dioramas! A second grade poetry slam!" Calm down there, marketing folks. While this book does contain dioramas and a poetry program ("slam" is pushing it), it comes nowhere near the level of implied wackiness, and at no point did I find myself laughing out loud. This is not *Clementine*, and to market it that way is selling it short.

The Year of Billy Miller is, like most Henkes novels, a quiet, slightly melancholy meditation on a collection of moments. It is structured episodically, in four parts (Teacher, Father, Sister, Mother) that chronicle Billy's conflict and reconciliations with the people closest to him. The Teacher section, for example, has echoes of Lilly and her purple plastic purse, as Billy struggles to correct a humiliating misunderstanding with his new teacher. Along the way, we see Billy grow and begin to come into his own, thereby fulfilling his father's prediction that this will be the titular "year of Billy Miller." Throughout the book, Billy takes tentative steps towards increased self-confidence and mature relationships, until at the climactic poetry reading, he shows us just how far he's come.

Billy Miller is primarily a character-driven book, and Henkes' beautifully complex characters are on full display. Billy, of course, is a wonderful, full-blooded second-grade boy, full of contradictions and half-baked ideas about the world. The other characters are fully realized as well, especially the occasionally moody stay-at-home artist dad. As always, Henkes uses his words sparingly but effectively, establishing character with telling details like the way the teacher involuntarily touches her hair when she thinks Billy is making fun of her chopstick hair accessories.

Stylistically, Henkes is a minimalist, and the early chapter book format is the perfect showcase for that. The scene where Billy and his mother bury a dead bird is one of the loveliest stretches of prose I've read this year - filled with sensory details - but it is almost entirely devoid of adjectives or adverbs. Joanne Rowling, take note!

If *Billy Miller* has a handicap at the Newbery table, it may be its episodic structure. Of course, that didn't keep *The Graveyard Book* from winning, and the two books share a thematic unity that ties the episodes together. My only other quibble: Henkes never really resolves Billy's conflict with Emma - a small but unsatisfying omission. Otherwise, this is definitely one of the year's best middle grade novels.

Emily says

I once had a teacher who said, if one of us was flummoxed as to the accolades given a particular work or writer, "Maybe you just weren't invited to the party." Though I'm a fan of a lot of Kevin Henkes's books, I was not invited to the party on this one. Two stars feels shabby, but "It was ok" is exactly how I feel. "Billy" has picked up lots of starred reviews and is widely considered a Newbery contender. The stories it tells--about the dread of feeling misunderstood by your 2nd grade teacher, a sibling who both annoys and comforts, wanting to do well on school assignments that go whimsically, parents going through tough times--feel reminiscent of ground better covered (and covered with more charm) in Ramona Quimby books. I recently read Ann Cameron's "The Stories Huey Tells"--another collection of episodes, some funny, some more serious, in a young boy's life--and it held much more magic and feels more memorable to me than Henkes's book.

Jennifer says

This story of a second grader's school year, related through his experiences with the key people on his life: Teacher, Father, Sister, Mother, is just right. Billy, his sister, friends and the caring adults that inhabit his small orbit are rendered darn near perfectly and provide a rich, warm portrait of a child's inner life. The short, meaty sentences are thoughtfully constructed, and it feels like not a word is wasted in this just over 200 page beginner novel for young fans of Ramona or Clementine. Or anyone who was ever 7.

Destinee Sutton says

I really wish that, instead of a 229-page novel for 2nd graders, Henkes had written four 70-page novellas for 2nd graders. Seriously.

Newbery update: I actually had a dream last night that Billy Miller won the Newbery Medal and I was so disappointed. Turns out, it won an Honor, and I'm not so disappointed. It's nice for the Newbery committee to recognize a book for younger readers, even if I still believe this is really four books crammed into one too-long book. I will continue to think that, while this book has its charms, it's kind of boring and nowhere near as charming as a Ramona, a Clementine, or a Fudge.

Angie says

I don't normally read around this age range, and this book was a very simple read so it is fine for grades 1+, but I thought it was kind of boring. The main character goes through his second year of school in this book, and the length of the book might be intimidating to readers under second grade, but the writing style is definitely simple enough for 1st graders. So it has that going against it. Also, as I mentioned, it was boring. This book looks pretty long and intimidating, but most of that could have been cut back and shortened. Here's what happens to Billy in a year: He knocks himself out and gets a bump, he's afraid he's not smart enough for second grade, his desk partner is a little prat, his teacher may hate him, his father needs inspiration for his art, Billy wants to stay up all night, he writes a poem about his mother. All these "plot points" are resolved within a couple pages and completely forgotten, but somehow takes up 240 pages. It's as if each chapter was meant to be a separate, beginning chapter book, but Henkes decided to throw them all together to make a whole book.

Anyway, I read this for our Mock Newbery, and it is certainly not getting a vote from me.

Betsy says

I don't readily compare books to Ramona (now THERE'S a sentence opener, ladies and gentlemen). To compare any children's book to Beverly Cleary's classic series just leaves one wide open to ridicule. The Ramona books are classics for a very particular reason; they place a sturdy, hard-as-nails finger directly on an age that is traditionally forgotten. Kids between the ages of six and ten are nebulous creatures. Too old to be cute little itty bitties and too young to enjoy the rights and privileges of their older kin, the 6-10 year old crowd straddles our traditional age ranges. Walk into any library or bookstore and you'll see titles for kids separated in a very particular fashion: picture books, easy readers (for when they're first learning to read), early chapter books (self-explanatory), and middle grade fiction. What's missing is what the Ramona books are. They're older than early chapter fiction but younger than middle grade. There is no term for this kind of book, and indeed it's one of the most difficult types of books to locate on a shelf. Now, at long last, *The Year*

of Billy Miller comes to occupy that same space, but its similarities to *Ramona* don't stop there. Filled with heart, smarts, humor, and a boy-centric p.o.v. that is almost impossible to pin down, Henkes has finally done for the chapter book set what he's been doing for the picture book readers for years. He's created a character for the ages.

Billy Miller wasn't always worried that he wouldn't be smart enough for second grade. To be blunt, the idea never even entered his brain. Then he fell. It wasn't life-threatening or anything but that fall from a guardrail to the ground certainly gave him a bump on the noggin. When he heard his mom confess to his dad that she worried there might be some kind of permanent damage, that's when his own worries started. Fortunately his Papa sets him right telling his son, "... I know – and I know everything – that this is the Year of Billy Miller." Turns out, Papa's right. Between making up with his teacher, helping his Papa with his art, attempting to stay up all night with his little sister Sal, writing a poem about his mom and so much more, second grade is turning out to be a full year. And Billy Miller's going to be smart enough for all of it.

Boy books. Oh, they're all the rage these days, didn't you know? Seems you can't walk two steps out your door without being barraged by calls to come save the boys. They don't read enough... no wait, they read but they need their own books. No, think again, they need more nonfiction. Or is it sports stories? Or humor? However you choose to define them, boy readers are highly sought after. Getting their personalities down on paper, however, is remarkably difficult work. The lazy writers will just throw some gross details on a page and then call their work done. Sometimes there will be a reference to sports and the like, but so many miss the point. When you're writing the p.o.v. of a boy you need to know exactly what it is that makes that boy tick. Now take Billy Miller here. Early in the book his parents are talking about his recent bump on the head and his mom says, "But I worry that down the line something will show up. He'll start forgetting things." His father's dead-on reply is, "He already forgets things... He's a seven-year-old boy."

Evidence of Billy's boyiness is everywhere. For example, when he's supposed to be writing a poem about his mother this is how the text explains his plight: "Billy had trouble getting started. He opened his poetry journal to the first page and wrote: My Mom. He couldn't think of anything else to write, so he drew a series of volcanoes in progressive stages of exploding." It would be difficult for me to explain to you how much I love that detail, but if pressed I would try. Then there's his nemesis Emster. Henkes never highlights this fact, but it's probably important to note that long before she's making Billy's life a misery, Billy cast the first shot across her bow. Which is to say, when she introduced herself in class as "Emster" he was the one who mistakenly (but buffonishly) misheard her as "Hamster". That's the kind of move guaranteed to make an instant enemy, and though Billy never remembers this moment again (and, if he did, it's difficult to say if he'd know why it was so important) it's clearly the catalyst for things that come.

Now consider the risk Henkes took with this book. His hero is seven. Yet Billy stars in a book that's 240 pages in length. There are some interstitial pictures, but nothing like what you'd find in the early chapter book section of your library. Even if you look up this title on something like Amazon.com you'll see that the suggested age for this book is "8 and up". Now does that make any sense at all to you? How many kids do you know that get a kick out of reading books about children younger than themselves? What we have here is a readaloud book. The kind of book meant for bedtimes and for those teachers who tackle a chapter a day in class. Henkes could have bowed out and upped his hero's age to nine or ten or even eleven. He didn't. He made Billy a 2nd grader because that's what Billy is. His mind is that of a second grader. His actions are those of a second grader. To falsely age him would be to make a huge mistake. Granted, Henkes risks alienating potential readers, but remember *Ramona* again. Aren't there older kids who like to read about her adventures? And hasn't she managed to last all these years in spite of these very concerns? You betcha. It's all about the writing, baby.

To point out that the writing in this book is superb is akin to pointing out that air helps one to breathe. It's obvious. This is Kevin Henkes, after all. Still, I've never quite connected to his novels in the same way that I've connected to his picture books. It's probably just me (the shiny Newbery Honor sticker on *Olive* s

Ocean is a clue) but his magnificent ability to hone a point down to its most essential details is very well suited to a 32-page format. I hadn't felt a similar ability until I read *Billy Miller*. First off, the lines themselves are just keen. Here are two of my favorites:

"Billy had known Grace since kindergarten. She was so shy she seemed almost invisible. Like vacuums, her wide eyes were sucking in everything."

"Billy sat alone, considering the choice he had to make. He sucked the web of skin between his thumb and pointer finger, his hand falling across his chin like a beard."

Beautiful. Then there are the characters themselves, it's nice when the wise all-knowing parents (in this case, primarily the dad) is flawed. This is nice. He gets testy when his work isn't going well, which makes for a nice character detail. The mom sort of sinks into the woodwork (though she does have a nice moment with Billy when he has to write about what she likes) and it's hard to remember much about her, but the dad uses terms like "Isn't she cute? Just looking at her shreds my heart." Sal, Billy's little sister, is an appropriate mix of cute and annoying. Billy is a typical older brother but you have to love it when he freaks himself out by thinking of scary things in bed and runs to her room for companionship and comfort. It shreds my heart, it does.

In the end, *The Year of Billy Miller* is a stand-alone title that really does leave you wanting more. You've gotten so close to Billy and his family that they stick in your brain long after you've closed the covers. You can't help but hope that there are more Billy Millers on the horizon. To create just one would be a cruel tease. At the very least this book is a boon to any librarian who has faced a parent at a reference desk saying, "My kid loves Ramona. What else do you have like that?" Ladies and gentlemen, we have our answer. Absolutely remarkable.

For ages 5-10.

Ruhama says

Billy is going into second grade, and he's a little worried he won't be able to handle it. Both his parents assure him he'll do great and will love his teacher. The year starts out a little rough: he's certain Ms. Silver doesn't like him, there's a new girl in class (Emma--a bit of a Bossy Pants) and the school work load is much higher than in first grade. But as the year progresses, Billy does find that it *is* his year, just as his mom said at the start of school. The year ends with the whole class reciting poems (on stage! with a microphone!) about someone important in their lives. For Billy? He chooses his mom.

A relatively easy chapter book, this story fills a hole in that juvenile fiction section: the kids beyond easy readers, but not quite ready for the Boxcar Children. Henkes does a lovely job capturing a year in the life, exploring all aspects of Billy's school year. The book is divided into sections, advancing the year without bogging the reader down with a strict timeline. Henkes also has little bits of artwork sprinkled throughout, too! I appreciated the character development and how Henkes didn't feel the need to 'fix' certain things by the end of the story. For example, we never find out why Emma is such a pain, and she doesn't miraculously become Billy's best friend by the end of the book! The secondary characters also had personalities (impressive, as we're reading this book from a second grader's viewpoint). I was a little sad at how old the kids felt, though--Billy was pushing his parents away emotionally throughout, and Sal had a pretty good vocabulary for a three year old. Overall, this book is a winner (with lovely parents, too) and is a great 'boy book'.

Susan Dove Lempke says

It's very unusual to find a full-length novel about a second grader. The presumption in children's literature is that kids want to read about someone older than they are, or their same age at the most. They might occasionally want to look back with a mix of nostalgia and humor especially if a book is part of a series, like Cleary's Ramona books. But something like this, with over 200 pages about a second grader? Unheard of.

It's a very true and tender look at this particular second grader, Billy Miller. His concerns are realistic for a smart, sensitive kid--for instance, he makes a horrible face at a classmate who has upset him, and he realizes that his teacher thinks he made it at her. He gets frustrated while working in a diorama, and is mortified when his little sister shakes glitter over it to give his cave scene some fairies, and he looks at her "with laser eyes". His problems are small, but they are exactly right for a second grader living with a loving family, and they are realized with humor and interesting detail. As in most Henkes books, the adults are also very sensitive and kind, and they give Billy the room to work things out for himself.

Kids who have already become fluent readers by first or second grade will rejoice in having a book about kids their own age, and other kids will enjoy having it read to them.

Allison says

When Billy suffers a head injury right before the start of his 2nd grade school year, he and his parents are worried that he is going to under-perform, or exhibit memory problems. Billy internalizes his injury and worries, is he smart enough for second grade? As he navigates through the school year, all of his different relationships are showcased in their own official sections of the book: teacher, father, sister, mother. His father is an unemployed artist looking for his big break...meanwhile he is playing mr. mom while his wife works to support the family. Other than that, they are a typical family. While this book is a well-written piece of realistic fiction, it is entirely anticlimactic, and downright underwhelming. Nothing happens...no plot turns, no real conflicts. It is simply a book about a boy and his family and their everyday lives. While I love Kevin Henkes, this is absolutely my least favorite book by him.

Kids would be bored stiff.

Donalyn says

A story that captures the magic of ordinary things--a smile from your teacher, your love for an annoying little sister, or sharing a quiet moment with your mom. This book would be a perfect read aloud for second or third graders.

Jenny says

I started reading this book because I received an ARC copy and I was bored last night and it was lying right next to me. It's about second grader Billy Miller who has a stay-at-home dad who is a struggling artist, a 3-year-old sister, and a mom who is a teacher. Billy Miller is starting a new year of school and it tells the story of his year through 4 chapters, each one focused on his relationship with the important people in his life.

Billy definitely thinks and acts like a 2nd grader and I liked seeing how he learns to connect with each person in his family. During this year you see how he grows up a little bit more and he's endearing in that he's sweet and loving but he also gets frustrated, angry, and emotional. This is a cute chapter book with some funny parts but the jacket copy says it's laugh-out-loud which is a total stretch. It claims to be like the Ramona books but Ramona is a lot more mischievous and kooky and that makes her more funny. Some of the vocabulary is also a bit too sophisticated for 2nd graders so perhaps as a read aloud it would be okay. The sister's vocabulary and sentence structure also makes her sound like a 3-year-old prodigy. This is an okay book but I bet there are more awesome books out there.

I learned that the term "food baby" has joined the elementary school vernacular.

Alyson (Kid Lit Frenzy) says

Every once in awhile you need to pick up a book that makes you feel good. The Year of Billy Miller is certainly one of those books. Henkes use of language in this book is superb. Readers will identify with Billy, his younger sister Sal, and even his father. And where most books feature mom prominently and dad takes a more backseat role, this book is reverse. Dad is an artist who stays at home while mom works as a teacher in a high school. And though it is the relationship that Billy has with his dad that you see the most, the few scenes with his mom especially at the end are very touching.

This is not a story that develops one aspect of being at school - it could have focused more on Billy's issues with Emma or his friendship with Ned or even his connection with Ms. Silver, but instead little things are touched upon or referred to and readers instead receive little glimpses into who Billy is (a typical 2nd grade boy) and what a year in his life it.

Where this might not be read so much by older students, it will be one for 2nd and 3rd graders and it will make a lovely read aloud.

Chris Go says

Clearly I have been reading a lot of Lemony Snicket of late. I'd say too much, but I don't think that is possible. As I read "The Year of Billy Miller", I kept waiting for the big bad thing to happen.

The book is divided into sections called Teacher, Father, Sister, and Mother. As I finished one, I would think, oh wow, nothing bad happened in that section, does the next character have something terrible happen? When nothing bad happens to the sister, I was going crazy thinking the author was going to kill off the mother, but there were not that many pages left! Then I thought, oh no, Billy is going to be diagnosed with a brain tumor! The thoughts running in my head were really really awful as I conjured bad things that might happen: the parents get divorced, the parents die in a car accident, the sister gets abducted, or the teacher gets fired for not doing a normal play. My mind was truly racing.

I know this book made it on many of the year's best books, and even a few mock Newbury lists floating about the Internet, so I thought something really crazy had to happen (beyond what you learn on the book flap that Billy bumps his head pretty badly while on vacation with his family. Yes, the ending is sweet, and yes, there probably are not enough books about average kids living fairly average lives, but I guess I was expecting something else. Of course, the writing is brilliant. And the story is good too. It just is not a tragic plot twister.

Scope says

The Henk, man - The Henk.
