

During my four-year stint at Borders, Inc., I spent many hours in the children's department, and if I close my eyes I can picture the spine of Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth*, or the cover when the occasional surplus allowed for a neat stack of out-facing blue books with a curious picture of a white-haired child and an enormous dog whose body was a stopwatch. I thought to myself he's dog-gone serious about time but thankfully never had the nerve to utter it aloud, and while I recognized the book as one of the classics, I never managed to read it.

Reading it for this historical lookback, I was pleasantly surprised at Juster's light-hearted creation. I knew the *Bulletin's* original review was unimpressed, and the reviewer irritated at the liberal use of puns (they definitely are everywhere) probably had a difficult time hate-reading this book with their eyes in a continuous rolling motion. The truth is, though, that reviewer wasn't entirely wrong: *The Phantom Tollbooth* is a pun-fueled story, chock full of dad jokes. Some reviews also slot Milo accusingly as bored, but here's the thing: is Milo really the problem? Yes, he is bored, but is he somehow at fault for experiencing that feeling? I would suggest that Milo's lack of inspiration doesn't rest entirely on his shoulders. Artists seek new surroundings for inspiration because their current environment hasn't sparked creativity. What's the difference? And what was going on before the story began that caused his severe case of "meh?" Perhaps he needed to sit with the boredom. Without it, there would have been no journey.

There's plenty of currently thematic relevance under the jokes, too. Think of the Forest of Sight where "there's so much to see... But I suppose there's a lot to see everywhere, if only you keep your eyes open," a resonant message for today's tech-obsessed world, wherein eyes are usually downcast staring at a screen. Identity and individuality are also

key takeaways in *The Phantom Tollbooth*; neither this book, nor Milo, fit neatly into a box. Milo discovered that people learn differently and that is just fine, there's no shame in it. The storytelling is unorthodox (okay, it's weird and I'm here for it), but it gets its point across and provides laughs along the way. Of course learning is important—everyone knows that—but for the Milos of the world, for whom the traditional methods of/reasons for acquiring knowledge isn't enough, we could benefit from fantasy reads like *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

- *Quinita Balderson, Reviewer*