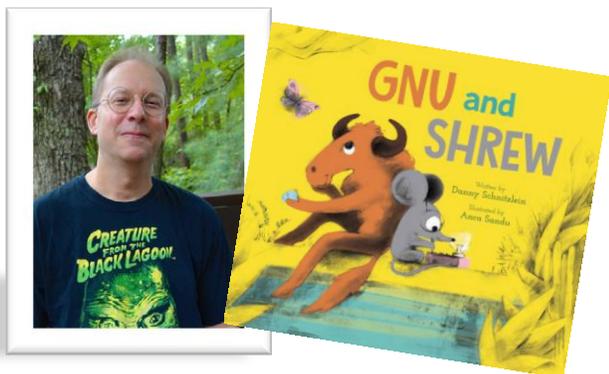


AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Danny Schnitzlein on *Gnu and Shrew*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Opposites attract—but can they work together?

When Gnu says that there's a cave filled with diamonds across the river, Shrew is intrigued. But Gnu seems to be all talk, fantasizing about riches yet dismissing all of Shrew's suggestions. As Gnu dreams his days away, tossing out one big idea after another, Shrew spends his nights trying to make those dreams a reality. Can Gnu's big ideas and Shrew's hard work make something remarkable happen?

Q: *What inspired you to write Gnu and Shrew?*

A: Usually, when I'm working on a manuscript, I have an AHA! moment when I realize I'm trying to send myself a message. My subconscious is trying to teach me an important lesson that I'm too dense to learn on my own. With this story, my subconscious was trying to point out my bad work habits. Like Gnu, I'm really good at dreaming up ideas and starting new projects. But I'm not always good at carrying through, doing the daily work, and completing projects, the way Shrew does.

Another inspiration for the story is my fear of alligators and crocodiles. Children's stories like *The Saggy Baggy Elephant* and *How the Elephant Got His Trunk* put that fear in me at a young age. The most terrifying monster movies, for me, are the documentaries

where crocodiles leap out of murky water to grab unsuspecting animals who've come to the riverbank for a sip. Fear is what keeps us from following our dreams. The crocodiles in *Gnu and Shrew* symbolize those fears. (Spoiler Alert: there are NO scary crocodile attacks in *Gnu and Shrew*.)

Q: *How did you react when you first saw Anca Sandu's interpretation of your story?*

A: Anca's characters are so adorable and full of personality. There is joy in her creations. I laughed out loud when I saw Gnu taking a nap, face down in the dirt. And Shrew is just so adorable and easy to love. There is a deceptive simplicity to Anca's art. The closer you look, the more you realize it's not simple at all. There are so many delicious details. Children and adults respond to her characters with smiles. She is a talented artist and I'm so glad Peachtree matched us up for this project. Also, I think it's cool to have a female co-creator for the first time. I hope female artists see the photo of Anca on the back flap and say, "I want to do this! I can do this!"

Q: *How was working on Gnu and Shrew different from your past projects?*

A: My three previous books were about monsters and were written in verse. *Gnu and Shrew* is written in prose and there are no monsters, unless you count the crocodiles. I love African and Caribbean folktales, like the Anansi stories. There is a beauty to the language of those stories. Every word is essential, and they are meant to be spoken aloud. For *Gnu and Shrew*, I was trying to capture that flavor. I really enjoy writing in verse. It's like writing music, but it's extremely time consuming. It's been refreshing to shift gears and write in prose. When you write in verse and have to change a word, you have to change twenty words to keep the meter consistent. When you change a word in prose, you only have to change one word. On the other hand, when you write a folktale, you spend a lot of time crossing out words to make each sentence lean and concise. That's an important strategy for picture books in general, but it's especially important in fables and folktales.

Q: While Gnu dreams of ways to reach the cave of diamonds, Shrew is working tirelessly to make those dreams a reality. Are you more like Gnu or Shrew?

A: I am definitely more like Gnu. I can dream up new story ideas all day long. But I am teaching myself to be like Shrew and finish what I start. There is a quote attributed to William Faulkner, “I only write when I’m inspired. Fortunately, I am inspired at 9 o’clock every morning.” Inspiration isn’t something we wait for. We have to stir it up inside ourselves. That’s what Shrew does. He is the embodiment of “carpe diem.” But Shrew also has a creative mind. He draws inspiration from Gnu’s ideas and makes connections to synthesize something new. As a kid, I loved the BBC show “Connections” by James Burke, which showed how the great ideas and inventions of history were synthesized and connected to past ideas. The ancient Greeks were very close to making the connections that would have invented steam power. Imagine how the world would be different if they had! In defense of Gnu, it can be useful to let ideas percolate. Sometimes you need to step back from an idea for a while to gain perspective.

Q: Where is your favorite place to write?

A: My favorite places are libraries and coffee shops, but I can write just about anywhere. Most of my first three books were written at the public library. A lot of writing takes place in my head when I’m taking a walk or mowing the lawn. When I’m asleep my brain keeps working on the story, so when an idea hits at 4 a.m. I know I’d better get up and write it down. If I don’t, I won’t remember it in the morning.

Q: You studied creative writing in college. Did you always know you wanted to write children’s books?

A: I had excellent professors at Eckerd College, especially Sterling Watson, Jewel Spears Brooker, and Juile Empric. I didn’t set out to be a children’s author. I studied short stories, novels, plays, and other forms. I took a three-week class in England studying British literature and visiting the homes of authors like Shakespeare, Dickens, and Lord Byron. It was life-changing. But after two years of college, my father told me I wasn’t allowed to major in English. This really pulled the rug out from under me, because up until then my parents had encouraged my writing. Parents often push creative children into more “practical” careers,

hoping to rescue us from poverty. I switched paths, studying television and landing a job creating television commercials for news stations around the country. I was good at it, but my heart wasn’t in it. Luckily, I was hired to write some scripts for children’s television, and realized how much I like writing for a young audience. That inspired me to write *The Monster Who Ate My Peas*.

Q: If you weren’t a children’s book writer, what would you be doing?

A: I would be a screenwriter, artist, or songwriter. I enjoy painting imaginary landscapes and have taught acrylic painting classes for adults and children. Over the years I have written many scripts and songs for children’s educational television. Recently I was hired to write four songs for an educational app that will be used in the classroom. I’m very proud of how those songs turned out. I’m happy when I’m creating, no matter what medium I’m working in.

Q: What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

A: Believe in yourself. Surround yourself with positive people, people who believe in you. Build a quiet space and time to write. Protect that space and keep it sacred. Interruptions kill creativity. Sometimes writing ten or fifteen minutes a day will sustain the momentum to get your story finished. For children’s writers I recommend joining SCBWI (Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators). Attend conferences and meet other writers, editors, and agents. SCBWI will also help you find children’s writers in your area so you can join a writing group. Being part of a group gives me a deadline that keeps me, like Shrew, working a little each day. I’m grateful to my group, especially our leader Debbie D’Aurelio, for keeping me writing. I would also say it’s important to write from your heart. Write to entertain yourself, instead of trying to ride the coattails of the latest trend. You’ll always do your best work that way. M.T. Anderson says you should always be working on several different manuscripts. That way, if one gets rejected, your world isn’t shattered. You still have more eggs in your basket. I think that’s good advice. It contains a little bit of Gnu, and a little bit of Shrew.

Q: Why do you think it’s important for children to read a story about the importance of both dreamers and doers?

A: To be successful, you need both. You need the dreamer to brainstorm ideas. You need the project manager to keep chipping away at the task until it's finished. We all have a little of the dreamer and the doer inside. Some people are more of one than the other. The first draft of *Gnu and Shrew* was more cut and dry, like *The Little Red Hen* or *The Ant and the Grasshopper*. Shrew was good and Gnu was bad. Kathy Landwehr, my brilliant editor at Peachtree, opened up the possibility that Gnu isn't the bad guy. He's an essential part of the creative process. The story works much better when the two characters are friends who care about each other. Shrew uses Gnu's ideas when making his boat. Shrew wouldn't know about the diamonds if Gnu hadn't told him. Each offers something important that helps reach the goal. In the end, Gnu admits his mistake in not helping Shrew build the boat. And Shrew knows he wouldn't be successful without Gnu's ideas. So they work together to reach a new goal.

I wanted to be careful not to send a message to children that "play is bad." Sadly, American society tends to be prejudiced against dreamers. We hear that creative people "have their heads in the clouds," that they're "quirky" and "unfocused." Teachers don't let students sketch during lectures because they falsely believe those students aren't paying attention. Businesses view people with more creative ideas as having less leadership potential. The truth is, dreamers make life worth living. Imagine a world with no art, movies, books, or music. Who would want to live in that world?

Q: What do you hope readers take away from *Gnu and Shrew*?

A: It's possible to reach your dreams, no matter how far away and impossible they may seem. Don't give up. Work a little each day. Follow your heart. Trust your instincts. Nurture your creative and practical sides. I hope readers will build friendships with those who look or think differently from themselves. As a kid I loved *The Fantastic Four* because their differences made them much more powerful than the sum of their parts. Gnu and Shrew are like that, too.

Q: What can we look forward to next from you?

A: I am superstitious about discussing projects. Whenever I talk about a manuscript I'm working on, it never seems to get published. Like Gnu, I am constantly working on new ideas. I have picture book, middle grade, and YA manuscripts that I'm working on. Some

are completed. Some are not. My writing group helps nurture the Shrew part of me, so I finish my projects. I'm thankful that readers have found something to enjoy in my books. I find it astonishing and heart-warming that readers are still enjoying *The Monster Who Ate My Peas* after nearly twenty years. It's been adapted into a touring stage musical by ArtsPower, and a ballet by Grand Rapids Ballet. I hope to keep writing books as long as people want to read them. Whoops! Sorry, I have to go now. Shrew says it's time for me to write. 😊

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danny Schnitzlein studied creative writing at Eckerd College and holds a BS degree from the University of Florida. He lives in Georgia.