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WELL

Behind the 'Wimpy Kid' Phenomenon

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

This is a big week for the grade-school set. Greg Heffley, the crude and clueless protagonist of Jeff Kinney's wildly popular book series, "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," is back.

Like the first three books in the series, "Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days," chronicles the misadventures of Greg and his best friend, Rowley, two middle-school students who try to navigate [adolescence](#), home life and the social pecking order at school, all by putting forth as little effort as possible.

Like the others, it is filled with Mr. Kinney's easygoing first-person narrative and his artfully artless drawings. Its plot revolves around the slapstick, laziness and ethical lapses that have engaged millions of 8-to-12-year-old readers and left parents scratching their heads.

"Dog Days," which was released Monday, is already the best-selling book on Amazon.com, ahead of the likes of [Dan Brown](#) and [Glenn Beck](#). Early interest has been so strong that the publisher, Abrams, increased its initial print run to four million copies, from three million.

The Internet is filled with testimonials about children who were frustrated readers until they got their hands on a Wimpy Kid book. But some parents have been less enthusiastic.

"The words 'moron,' 'jerk,' 'dork' and 'hot girls' are used in the first five pages," complains a reviewer on Amazon of the first book. "This is a poor choice for good character building in your children."

But given the books' powerful appeal among both girls and boys, child development experts say parents have a lot to learn from Greg and company. While books like the [Harry Potter](#) series create an imaginative fantasy world, the Wimpy Kid books give us a rare glimpse into a child's ethical mind.

"It really captures the struggle of a child that age trying to figure out what it means to be a person," said Dr. Joshua Sparrow, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Sparrow read the first Wimpy Kid book after a young patient told him about it.

"I think it can help parents tune into what kids know and how they think," he went on. "It captures what a child is able to get and what's beyond their reach, and how you have to adjust your expectations because they are still a work in progress."

Dr. Lawrence Rosen, a pediatrician who founded the Whole Child Center in Oradell, N.J., says he has talked about the series with his third-grade daughter, who says she likes that the main character is "not perfect."

"The power of the book is about the wimpy kid, a regular kid with regular problems, just dealing with what life brings him," Dr. Rosen said. "For parents, I suppose reading the books or at least discussing them with our kids will give us a more realistic idea of what their lives are like, the struggles they face every day."

Mr. Kinney says he originally wrote the stories for adults, aiming for funny and nostalgic recollections of childhood, and "never imagined" them as children's literature. Rather than offering moralistic lessons, he focused on the humor inherent in the misguided decisions that children often make.

In one much-talked-about scene from the first book, Greg, who is in middle school, benefits from a case of mistaken identity: because he happens to be wearing Rowley's jacket when he terrifies a group of kindergarteners with worms on a stick, his best friend is the one who faces [punishment](#).

Greg's mother senses he is struggling with a moral dilemma and advises him to "do the right thing."

After tossing and turning, Greg concludes, "I decided that the right thing to do was to just let Rowley take one for the team this time around."

In the end Rowley is punished, and Greg's mother, who mistakenly believes he's made the right choice, rewards him with ice cream.

"Greg really does think he's done the right thing, and thinks he's learned his lesson," Mr. Kinney, who is 38 and has sons 6 and 4, told me. "You're expecting at any moment that an adult is going to set things straight, but none ever does."

Mr. Kinney says most of his feedback comes from grateful parents who say the books have turned their children into readers. But a few parents do complain that Greg sets a bad example.

"I have complete respect for that position, and I've been shocked there hasn't been much more of it," he said. "If there is a lesson in the book, it's to do the opposite of what Greg does. Even my kindergarten child understands that Greg is being naughty, and that he shouldn't act like him."

In "Dog Days," Greg starts a lawn business, but cuts the grass haphazardly and complains when his customers won't pay. His father removes a customer's lawn free of charge, but Greg insists he's done nothing wrong. "I'm trying to find a way to earn money without doing any actual work," he explains.

Dr. Sparrow says part of the book's appeal is that it doesn't moralize. "If you had an omniscient voice saying, 'Do the right thing,' kids would tune that out," he said. "It leaves room for the child to be challenged to decide what he or she thinks."

Questionable behavior aside, there is no question that kids love these books. When my fifth grader learned I had scored an early copy of "Dog Days," she wrestled it away from me and began to devour it. Upon finishing, she closed the book with great satisfaction. After a moment, she opened it and started reading it again from the beginning.

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