

The BiblioFiles Presents: Adam Rex

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is *New York Times* best-selling author and illustrator Adam Rex. Since 2003, Rex has brought his unique, artistic style and unparalleled humor to a multitude of picture books, such as *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich*, *Nothing Rhymes with Orange*, and *On Account of the Gum*.

In 2007, he published his first children's novel, *The True Meaning of Smekday*, which was later adapted into the DreamWorks animated movie, *Home*. *Smekday* was followed by a sequel, as well as the *Cold Cereal* trilogy and the young adult novel, *Fat Vampire*. In addition to his independent work, Rex has collaborated with Jon Scieszka, Neil Gaiman, Jeff Kinney, Kate DiCamillo, Eoin Colfer, Christopher Paul Curtis, and many others.

There are few writers who can match Rex's comedic abilities, his timing, dialog, narrative pacing, unusual metaphors, and talent for counterbalancing emotion with irreverence are enviable. Cap all that with his amazing artistic abilities that range from technically perfect comic panels to pop-eyed picture book cats and well... he's pretty much a rock star. Adam Rex, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

ADAM REX: Thank you so much for having me, Dana.

DR. DANA: Growing up, what were your comedic influences?

ADAM REX: I think about this a lot because I think kids want to – I actually had a kid at a school asked me just— was that yesterday? It was a school visit in the coronavirus era so it was actually just like a Zoom or a Google Meet or something with all of the first, second, and third graders at the school— and one kid asked me how I got to be funny, which is always a nice question to get because it presumes that I am. But it also is a hard question— I think it's a hard question in almost the same caliber of like, “where do you get your ideas?” You’re some kind of ineffable synthesis of 4,000 influences, most of which you're not even consciously aware of. So, I don't know, long story short, probably *Looney Tunes* cartoons.

I read funny books when I was a kid. I think the book that I always think of first as far as picture books go is *The Monster at the End of This Book*, the classic Jon Stone, Michael Smollin, *Sesame Street* book about Grover, which is older than I am I think, and which was just like a groundbreaking, funny, meta-fictional kid's book at a time when people weren't really doing that. And then as I got a little bit older, starting at age 11, I started reading a lot of Douglas Adams. So, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and everything that came after. I don't— that's not necessarily a book that an 11-year-old should be reading, but I think I got most of it and I just

sort of glossed over the really British British-isms, and I think I spent, probably, the next 20 years of my life trying to unlearn how to write like Douglas Adams because I was just writing a pastiche of him for a long time afterwards.

DR. DANA: Please make all of us artists feel better by completing this sentence: I still can't draw blank; it just ends up looking like blank.

ADAM REX: Oh. I don't want to disappoint you. I'm pretty good at hands and horses. I still don't get why we're drawing bicycles. All of the cars that I draw are like adorably, like bluepee, big-fendered cars because I don't have any interest in drawing like a Ford Taurus, but yeah. It sounds like I'm— it's braggadocio now but I don't feel like I have a thing anymore where it's just like, oh no I got to— I got to draw a horse for this. This is going to be torturous. I cheat a lot. I get 10 pictures of horses and I go upstairs and I find the briar horse model that I have and I bring that down.

I think if I'm going to make any of those struggling artists out there feel better, I just want it to be clear that I use real life as much as I possibly can even if I'm drawing something that is patently unrealistic. So, if I got a horse to do, then I start with the most real horse I can and work from there. I have a lot of models and I make models, too.

Your audience is not going to be able to see, for example, that I'm holding up a clay version of my character, Rock, from *The Legend of Rock Paper Scissors*. I made a little guy, a little three-inch-tall sculpture of that character so that I could look at it from any angle and I wouldn't have to puzzle over what he looked like in a 3/4 view with the back of his head facing the camera kind of a way. I could actually just look at it and then, if I had to, push it farther and actually cheated to make it a little more interesting, that I can take that realism and exaggerate in whatever fashion I feel like the story needs.

DR. DANA: You've written and illustrated your own books, but also collaborated as a writer and illustrator with other individuals. What are some of the essential lessons you've learned in these collaborations?

ADAM REX: Well, I really feel like when it comes to the picture book you need to go into the collaboration whether you're the author or the illustrator understanding, that the picture book is— it belongs to both people. So, I think the best picture book authors don't write an excessively complete picture book manuscript. They leave room for the illustrator to tell part of the story. They don't describe what doesn't need to be described if it's going to be illustrated more completely in the pictures anyway.

So, I really do— I have to take that, now, to the other side of things because more recently I've actually been writing more and more picture books that I don't illustrate, so I have to remember to be the kind of author that I wanted to work with when I was just illustrating other people's stuff.

DR. DANA: *The True Meaning of Smekday* was your first novel for kids. It is a story about an alien invasion of Earth. It's also satire, which is something you really don't see as often in children's literature. You touch on complicated issues about American culture, history, race relations. What was it like to embark on your first novel after picture books and what approach did you take with the satire in *Smekday*?

ADAM REX: Well, with the satire in *Smekday*, it all kind of arose out of the fact that back in— I started writing it back all the way back in 2001— and I was reading some sort of pop culture books about American history in that way that I feel like a lot of people as soon as they were no longer in college anymore, they suddenly actually want to learn things kind of desperately now that they're no longer being required to. I was making a point of trying to get the American history and world history education that I felt like I hadn't really gotten. I went to some good schools, but I also feel like I was still subject to some of the questionable aggrandizing of certain characters that don't really deserve our— deserve to be honored.

You know this is still a conversation that's ongoing but— Christopher Columbus was still a hero when I was a kid in Phoenix in the 1970s and '80s, for example. So while I was reading these things I had a recollection, a really vivid recollection of myself at about 11 or 12, where I remembered learning certain things, certain questionable and less savory things about American history and wanting to kind of rationalize it and justify it in my mind because I wasn't sitting comfortably with the idea that my country had done poorly and had done bad things in the past and I was the descendant of European settlers. So, I identified, perhaps too much, with the European settlers of American history.

And I have this vivid memory of being like a 12-year-old and trying to convince myself that, for example, the treatment of the American Indian was okay somehow. And the only thing I can really say in my own defense is that I think the reason that this memory is so vivid is because I even understood as a kid that I was full of it, that this was wrong, that— I remember the cognitive dissonance as much as I remember the thing I was trying to tell myself.

So, I thought I'm going to write a kid's novel that is for that 11 or 12-year-old me where I am going to frame it as an alien invasion so that I can convince some kid out there who is like my young self to identify with the people with whom they should be identifying in these stories of colonialism and imperialism and victimization. So that was the idea that started it all and I thought, okay, I'm going to write a funny kid's novel, kind of a slapstick farce in sort of the Douglas Adams mold, and it's going to be that fun that gets them to read this thing that maybe makes them think about something later.

And I think I've indicated to you already that I have mixed feelings about that now because I can say all day long that my heart was in the right place, but maybe taking the tragic and complicated history of a group of people to whom I do not belong and deciding I'm going to use that as the basis for this funny allegory that I'm going to tell, it was quite possibly not my place to do that, and people have told me that it wasn't my place to do that, and I tend to agree with them.

You know, I'm still proud of that book, but I also feel like I learned some hard lessons and some hard-fought lessons. The first time I heard this kind of criticism it bounced off of me, I had a forcefield to it and it took a little while to take it in and realize that they were right.

DR. DANA: You continued to do a sequel after that. Was that issue in your mind or did these—did this come to your awareness after you wrote the sequel to *Smekday*?

ADAM REX: No, I can't remember the exact timeline, but I feel like I was already working on or maybe I had already finished the sequel when this line of thought made it to me. It was quite a number of years after I published *The True Meaning of Smekday* in 2007 that I came to be aware of it. And I don't know when that criticism was starting to be written, but I wasn't aware of it at first. So, I think I went ahead and continued to exacerbate some of the same mistakes that I made in the first book in the second book as well.

DR. DANA: Thank you for speaking about this so candidly and honestly.

ADAM REX: Well, I don't love it. I don't love talking about this, for obvious reasons, but I do feel obliged to at this point.

DR. DANA: The book is a very funny book. It is satire. You mentioned Douglas Adams, you mentioned how you want to bring kids in with the funny parts of it. But I also want to say that there are moments of real emotional gravity and I'm wondering if you could read a passage that demonstrates this ability you have to be funny, but also very serious at the same time, if you don't mind.

I'll introduce the passage by saying that the main character, Gratuity, and an alien named J. Lo, are traveling to Florida in a crazy car turned spacecraft they've dubbed Slushious, and they've just learned that another species of aliens, who are very hostile, are now also invading Earth. The only other thing you need to know about this passage is that Pig is, in fact, a cat.

ADAM REX: “We left Orlando under a cloud. I didn't even check the atlas. I just drove away from the rising sun, fast, determined to put some distance between us and the Boov in case they should decide to give chase again. We slid through the streets and highways following any signs that said west, setting out like Lewis and Clark into a wide frontier that had grown wild and unknown all over again.

We passed a flock of flamingos flying low over the wetland like gaudy umbrellas carried by the wind. They barely registered then. Thinking about them now, I realize it was the first I'd ever known that flamingos flew at all. It didn't suit them. They looked like sprinting drag queens, but at the time they were just another part of this new, haunted America with its empty cities and huge sweaty eye in the clouds watching over it all.

J. Lo was still a pale blue, curled up in his seat and staring at some point just behind the dashboard. Pig was happily dumb to the fact that the world had just ended for the second time in six months. She brushed back and forth against J. Lo and me trying to get a reaction, then eventually gave up and went to sleep in the back. I couldn't drive very far. I hadn't had any sleep.

I thought maybe J. Lo would be more alert and I didn't have anything against letting him drive anymore, but when I looked, I saw him tipped to the side, fogging up the window with closed eyes.

I made it some little town called I don't know what and found a scrap metal yard by the highway. It seemed like the right place for the three of us. I pulled Slushious between two massive piles of discarded city and curled up next to Pig. I cautiously cracked the window for some air. I thought it would stink like every other dump, but the scrapyards just smelled like pennies. It smelled like the US Mint probably smelled back when it's still made money. Back when pennies were pennies and not little worthless copper medallions, like prizes at a Lincoln look-alike contest. Back when dollar bills were not just wallet sized pictures of Washington.

It was about this time that all the metaphorical bad weather was replaced by the real thing and the clouds cracked open and rained. I think it was the kind of rain that only Florida gets, the kind that makes you want to start gathering animals in twos, just in case. I looked out the window and saw nothing. The downpour made the world look like a cable channel you hadn't paid for, all static with an occasional flash of something you thought you knew.

Pig was awake now, restless because of the constant rattle against the windows. She sat in my lap, kneading the skin of my leg with her claws. So we watched the storm, watched the wind push the rain around in billowing sheets like the ghosts of old oceans.

I'm sorry. I always get like this when I think about that day. For what it's worth, I fell asleep about now. Later, when I woke up, we were nearly killed in a flood, so that should be exciting.”

DR. DANA: So even though there are funny parts, you can clearly sense *Gratuity*'s desolation in the passage. How difficult is it to construct layers of funny and not funny?

ADMA REX: It's definitely like a tightrope act sometimes when— I really do think that what I'm trying to do is write funny things because I think life can be funny and I think people are funny and I also think that the humor can— as long as it's coming from a sort of a genuine character driven place— that it just deepens the depth of your connection with the characters in the story, so that when I turn towards something that is more heartfelt, or more emotional, or more dramatic, I think that hits that much harder because I've made the highs higher so I make the lows lower at the same time as I think the way it works, or at least that's what I'm trying to do.

So, yeah. I kind of— with a story like this, I really had to walk a razor's edge between dealing in an authentic way with the fact that this is an 11-year-old kid all on her own, trying to make her way across the country. Eventually she picks up an alien friend, but she doesn't have any other people in her life and her mom has been abducted early on in the story and has been missing from her narrative for a while. And this really should be very gut wrenching and terrifying for her, but maybe that's not a very engaging book to read, just 400 pages of gut-wrenching terror. So, I tried to let enough of that creep in that it didn't feel like I was ignoring it or not giving it the weight that it deserves even while I was also vacillating back the other way towards funny alien slapstick maybe a page later.

DR. DANA: The *Cold Cereal Saga* is a favorite in my home right now. The trilogy follows the adventures of a group of children as they discover a cereal company that is enslaving magical creatures for nefarious purposes. Tell us about your three-book journey with these characters.

ADAM REX: That was a learning experience because I had never— I ended up doing two *Smekday* books, but the second one was— it was not inevitable. It was more like I always thought, well I'll write another one if a story comes to me, but I wrote— I felt like I had written a story with a beginning, and a middle, and an end, and I didn't really need to have a sequel. And I'll admit for purely mercenary reasons that understanding that the movie based on that book it had gotten greenlit sort of lit a fire under me to really think about, oh, maybe I should have a second story in my head somewhere.

But *Cold Cereal* was always supposed to be a trilogy. And I wrote that first book the same way I write everything. I just sat down, and dove in, and made it up as I went along, and didn't plan anything, and wrote a bad first draft, and then figured out how to shape it and make it into a better second through seventh draft, and then it was a book. And then after that book was turned in I started writing the second one and that's when it really hit me, I can't keep writing this way because I just realized that I don't know how this overarching story ends.

And I'm halfway through writing the second book and the first book is about to be published and, my God what if there's something I really needed to put into the first book that I could set up for the second or the third? So finally— I feel like there's a lot of different ways to write but I felt like a real grown up, finally, that I opened a spreadsheet program for the first time in my life and I made a spreadsheet for all the different characters and where they were and what they were going to do when I figured out how the actual book was going to end.

And it's crazy to me now that I really had no idea how it was all going to wrap up. I just assumed that it was. And so about halfway through the second book, I just took a couple of weeks off, figured it all out, tossed a couple of small last-minute changes into the mix for the first book before it actually went to the printer, and managed to pull it out in the end. But made me realize that I'm a very self-indulgent writer where I just kind of tootle along and figure I'll fix it later and that wasn't going to work for a three-book series.

DR. DANA: Finally, your young adult novel, *Fat Vampire*, it is a spoof and therefore funny, but the tone is decidedly darker and more mature. Was this a different writing experience for you?

ADAM REX: It was a bit. And whenever I come up with any story idea, I don't— I'm never really sitting down to a desk and thinking, “okay, today I'm going to come up with a picture book,” or, “today, I think it would be good for my career if I made a YA novel rather than a middle-grade novel” or something. It was just that that idea got in my head and I realized it probably needed to be an older kids book, a YA novel rather than a decidedly middle-grade novel.

So otherwise, I don't know that it was all that different except I think having not written any YA novels I probably– if anything I went overboard with the, “oh, this has got to be really teen oriented, it's got to be more adult.”

Now when people are telling me that they read it, I want to like say, “oh, give me your copy and I'll write in the margins little apologies for all the swear words that I unnecessarily stuck into that manuscript,” but– I'm not sure it was all necessary, but I did feel like, “oh, I'm a picture book guy and I'm a middle-grade guy.” I got to carve out– I got to stake my claim and plant my flag in this book as being solidly YA. And I definitely did that.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

ADAM REX: I am working on a– I'm illustrating a picture book by Adam Rubin called *Gladys the Magic Chicken*, while I am simultaneously writing a series of young chapter books about a little wizard. It's sort of– my editor describes it as like if Amelia Bedelia had god-like, magical powers. That's kind of what my character is like.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHING] Wait, she doesn't?

ADAM REX: And the other thing I'm working on at the same time is actually another– I'll call it YA, but I think is a younger YA or it's an older middle grade. I don't know. I don't think it has any swearing in it this time is I guess what I'm trying to say.

DR. DANA: Adam Rex, thank you for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

ADAM REX: Thank you, Dana.