

The BiblioFiles: Platte F. Clark

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

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. I'm Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Platte F. Clark, author of *Bad Unicorn*. Max Spencer, middle school student, is about to have a very unusual day. It begins when he drags an old book from under his bed to use for a last minute book report. Unbeknownst to Max, this book is *The Legendary Codex of Infinite Knowability*, the most powerful book in three worlds. And Max is the descendant of Maximilian Sporazo, the book's creator. Right now, however, Max is just hoping to avoid the school bully, Ricky "the Kraken" Reynolds, and hang out with Dirk, his hyperactive game-obsessed best friend.

When Max unknowingly unleashes a spell from the Codex, he transports himself, Dirk, a girl named Sarah, and a disgruntled dwarf named Dwight into a future where humans are extinct and machines have taken over. It's going to take more than Glenn, the *Legendary Dagger of Motivation*, to get them out of this mess. As if that isn't bad enough, Max and his companions are being hunted by a unicorn, a bad unicorn, a nasty, petulant, human-eating unicorn. Princess the Destroyer has agreed to find Max and the Codex in exchange for an all-the-humans-you-can-eat rampage in Texas.

Bad Unicorn is irreverent, ironical, and completely hilarious. Clark composes an epic tale of good versus evil complete with nods to *Dungeons & Dragons*, computer games, malevolent sci-fi robots, zombies, fantasy novels, and '80s arcade games. There's even a dash of geek romance and an explanation of the true purpose of jackalopes. *Bad Unicorn* has it all.

The next book in the trilogy, *Fluff Dragon*, was released in April. Platte F. Clark joins us from Utah. Mr. Clark, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

PLATTE CLARK: Thank you so much. I appreciate you having me on.

DR. DANA: What concept idea or image started you on the path to writing this book?

PLATTE CLARK: You know, it really was the idea of Princess the Unicorn. And in a very early edition of the book, it was a little different and it focused more on the human characters in the human world. And I had this very short prologue that talked about the history of this particular book, and there was just this throwaway line about a unicorn named Princess who became Princess the Destroyer. And that was it. And the book itself had nothing to do with unicorns. And as I started to kind of rewrite and reform the story, and rethink about it, that image of just this unicorn named Princess the Destroyer resonated with my kids, who I often read my work to. And as I talked about it, it stuck in my mind, and I thought, you know, I think I really want to take

this character and make her the bad guy in this book and write a book around a character named Princess the Destroyer.

DR. DANA: Did you have a difficult time selling the idea of a carnivorous unicorn?

PLATTE CLARK: You know, it's funny. I really honestly thought that this would be-- so this is my first book. And as a newbie author I thought, you know what? I am just going to write a book and I'm not going to think at all about if it's going to sell, or if people are going to like it, or if it will ever do anything. I'm just going to write what I think is funny and what I think my kids think is funny. And then I'll sort of get the practice done, and then I'll write a real book that will probably go out and I'll try to become an author with. So I really took away any of the pressure of having to worry about whether it was a concept that would sell or be hard to digest-- and that's a pun probably. But I didn't think much about it. And I think it probably served me in the long run.

DR. DANA: Did you get any letters from little girls saying how dare you?

PLATTE CLARK: You know, not yet. Although, sometimes at book signings, there will be lots of little girls and they'll have the book. And I hope that I'm not about to completely change their theory of unicorns. And I think that-- or at least their experience with unicorns. And I think that Aladdin did a great job with the cover. When you see on the cover there's a stuffed impaled squirrel on the unicorn's horn and she's wearing bullets and bones in her teeth, I think it tips the hat a bit to the idea that this is not your "hang on the wall unicorn next to your kitten poster" variety.

DR. DANA: Unless it's a fire kitten, right?

PLATTE CLARK: Unless it's, yes, fire kitten for sure.

DR. DANA: There are different types of magic in this book. The Codex of Infinite Knowability is a powerful spell book. Princess the Destroyer wields her unicorn horn and turns a knight into a zombie. Dragons travel between worlds. Sorcerers launch giant blue fireballs into buildings. Human consciousness is downloaded into machines. Max and his friends travel through time. And somehow, all of it fits together. Did you set any ground rules before creating the magic used in this book?

PLATTE CLARK: I'll just admit that I didn't. And I know a lot of writers do, and I totally respect that. And a lot of writers when they think about magic have a very defined system. And I think that's really cool, and I enjoy reading those kinds of works. I actually wanted to just take all my experiences and the things that I enjoyed as a kid-- and you mentioned-- whether it was playing role playing games like Dungeons & Dragons, or various books that I read, or various ideas of just what magic might be, and what it might not be, and leave it kind of open-ended. So I do have some rules.

You know dragons and unicorns are the only two creatures that can take on human form, for example. They're the only two creatures that really can travel. Dragons can travel between the

realms. But unicorns and dragons have some special abilities. And then I divided magic into different kinds of classes. So you have warlocks that do certain things, and wizards to do certain things. So there is a little bit of a system to it, but I really wanted it to be open ended. I wanted to have fun with it and not be limited in any way. And just let my imagination run wild and let the adventures take just the craziest turns as Max and his friends find themselves in this completely crazy and hard to sort of get ahold of world sometimes.

DR. DANA: Bad Unicorn is an epic adventure peppered with references to Dungeons & Dragons, gaming, sci-fi movies, '80s arcade games, the exquisite pain of middle school. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read a passage that demonstrates how you blend all these elements together?

PLATTE CLARK: I'd be happy to.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that Max and his friends, Dirk, Sarah, and Dwight, have been transported into the future where humans are extinct, machines rule, and a robotic unicorn is hunting them. They've been discovered by a community of frobbits, gentle peace-loving creatures, who are often featured on the unicorn's menu. In this scene, Max, Dirk, and Sarah had been invited into the frobbits' council chambers to discuss what can be done about their situation. The only other thing listeners need to know is that in the frobbit language, Max means to suffer an itchy backside without having the means to scratch it.

PLATTE CLARK: "The underground room was spacious by frobbit standards, and Max and the others could actually stand without hitting their heads on the ceiling. It had been a short walk from the small door at the base of the tree to the chamber they now found themselves in. The room was shaped somewhat like an elongated egg, with a set of small circular windows near the top that allowed sunlight to filter in. Two frobbit guards, each holding a crudely fashioned spear, watched them impassively. Seated in the center at the thick wooden table were the frobbit elders - three males and two females. They all wore brightly colored robes, and the two females had colored ribbons in their gray hair.

'May I present our human visitors,' Yah Yah announced, waving his hand and ushering the group inside.

'How pleased the earth must be to feel human feet upon it after so long a time,' one of the females began. 'I am Ayriah, and these are my counselors, Hyril, Samtri, Goshri, and my sister Sayri.'

The council all nodded. 'Waz'up peeps?' Dirk exclaimed.

Max stepped forward, giving Dirk an elbow in the ribs for good measure. 'Sorry for my friend here,' he offered. 'He doesn't mean to be rude.'

'No offense was taken,' Sayri said pleasantly.

'Oh, good. Well, I'm Max.'

The council members frowned, casting glances back and forth. 'That's.... unfortunate,' Ayriah finally responded. 'We're truly sorry to hear that.'

'He does not have the itch!' Yah Yah blurted. 'Max is a human name.'

The council members nodded to one another, seemingly relieved.

'So, uh, these are my friends,' Max continued, the color fading from his cheeks after the initial embarrassment. 'Dirk, Sarah, and then there's Dwight the dwarf, but he's waiting outside.'

'And let's not forget Glenn the Legendary Dagger of Motivation,' Glenn added. 'Because everything's okay in the end. If it's not okay, then it's not the end.'

'Such wonders,' Ayriah said, astonished by the talking dagger. 'It's certainly an honor to meet you all.'

'You can imagine our surprise at finding humans among us,' Samtri began. 'The machine said all the humans had been hunted to extinction long ago.'

'What exactly is going on with these machines?' Sarah inquired. 'Why are they hunting you?'

Goshri, the shortest of the elders, spoke next. 'It is said that there was a time when this world was full of humans and their beloved machines. But the humans began to treat their machines unkindly, asking them to toast their bread, suck crumbs from their floors, or shuttle them to and fro so the fatter among them didn't have to walk. And then, after years of faithful service, these human masters would simply throw their faithful servants away because they either wore out or the humans got a fifteen-percent-off coupon for a replacement. Over the years the machines grew to resent their human overlords. Then Princess the Destroyer arrived, and she found the taste of humans much to her liking. Between her powerful magic horn and the humans' willingness to walk up and pet the "pretty pony," the humans proved no match for her. It was then that the machines sensed an opportunity. They turned against their human masters and helped Princess destroy them once and for all. As a reward for their liberation, the machines offered Princess everlasting immortality by downloading her consciousness into a robotic shell specially constructed for her. But without creatures to hunt, Robo-Princess grew restless. So she pulled our kingdom from one realm to the next-- bringing us here to be hunted for the entertainment of the Machine City. And it has been this way for many generations.'

'That's terrible,' Sarah said.

'To be fair,' Samtri added, 'we do get a dental plan.'

'People always thought unicorns were supposed to be nice,' Dirk said. 'They put them on little girls' birthday cakes for crying out loud.'

'How can anyone think such a thing?' Sayri exclaimed, looking shocked. 'They have a giant stabbing horn in the middle of their head.'

'You'll have to forgive Sayri,' Ayriah said gently. 'Her mate was killed at Gore-Fest.'

'How barbaric-- a festival where people are stabbed and gored?' Sarah exclaimed, truly horrified.

'No...,' Ayriah answered, somewhat confused, 'Gore-Fest is a reading of the collected works of Al Gore, from the twentieth century.'

'I'm so, so sorry,' Max said. 'I had no idea.'

'*Anyway*,' Goshri said, getting the conversation back on track. 'We're hoping you might be able to help us. Yah Yah says you are a great and powerful wizard.'

Max could see the hope in their eyes and his words stuck in his throat. 'I'm just a middle schooler. I can't do anything special-- I'm not even allowed to play sports; especially if the balls have pointy ends.'

Max looked over at Dirk who was hunched down and petting one of the frobbit guards on the head. The guard had nuzzled up to Dirk's hip and was scratching at the ground with his foot. 'Look how cute they are!' he exclaimed, rustling his hands through a curly patch of brown hair. 'They're like baby panda-kittens.'

'We've been without hope for so long,' Hyril added, 'it will only be a matter of years before the last of us are taken. We know you don't owe us anything, but we believe you came here for a reason. Can you help save us, Max Spencer?'"

DR. DANA: Thank you. That particular passage has a feeling of the scene from *The Hobbit* but it's also got some humor, sci-fi, and a reference to former Vice President Al Gore. That's a lot of different stuff. Would you name some of your major influences for writing this book? Your strategies for combining all these things together?

PLATTE CLARK: Sure. I think that the authors that influenced me most are probably Terry Pratchett from the *Discworld* series. And Douglas Adams from *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. And both of them just, to me, it just felt like I could take turns and do things that were unexpected, and throw in maybe a little bit of cultural pop references here and there. And they just made it all work in this sort of wonderful combination, of all these elements tied together with their wonderful humor. And I'm just a huge fan of both of these authors. As I am Tolkien and the traditional fantasy, *Sword of Shannara* I remember getting as a kid, and all of that. And so it really is paying homage to all the things that I loved as a kid, all of the books, and the media, and ideas that kind of percolated through these fantasy elements, and a little bit of things that you think are funny in current culture and pop culture. And I realized there's jokes that kids aren't necessarily going to always get, but I think that's OK. That when I wrote this book I thought I wanted to write something that not only I thought my kids would enjoy, but I would enjoy reading to them. And there were some things in there for me as well. So that was kind of my plan. And I won't say it was a well-articulated plan, I just grabbed everything I loved and threw it in there.

DR. DANA: What are a few of the things you threw in there for you?

PLATTE CLARK: Certainly. You know, a reference to Al Gore, I don't expect any of my kids to understand. I just thought it was funny that there was something called Gore-Fest and it turned out to be reading Al Gore and then someone died. I'm not sure how someone died from that but, you know, there was a fatality. You know, my undergraduate degree is in philosophy, so there's passages about the theology department debating the philosophy department about the existence of the gods. And any of those types of things I think are really things that I think are kind of funny. And Terry Pratchett does a lot with philosophy and some of those nods-- I don't do it often in the book-- but those are really passages, you know, that I think more that adult readers sort of get and the kids sort of move past them or get onto the story.

DR. DANA: Were you more like Max or more like Dirk when you were a kid?

PLATTE CLARK: I definitely was more like Max. I'll just admit that I was kind of a chubby middle schooler kid. And my parents moved when I was young from the west to the east coast. I was sort of displaced from my friends and displaced from-- everything was new in school. And I found refuge in reading and comics and role playing games. And that was kind of me. I'm sure I was very much kind of-- I had all those elements that Max has, I think it certainly it was part of my experience. I think I was a little better athlete than Max ultimately. But I certainly-- you often as a writer pull elements of your own life into one or more of your characters. And Max certainly represents a lot of my experiences as a middle schooler.

DR. DANA: There are some pretty impressive evildoers in this story. Is it more fun to write scenes for good guys or bad guys?

PLATTE CLARK: Boy, I think it's equally fun. You have to admit that just like eating your dessert before your dinner can be kind of fun, getting into the head of some of these evildoers and just playing in their world and having the restrictions lifted off that most of us work under, and let them do their thing, it is kind of fun. I'm not sure it's just like dessert. I wouldn't want to live there all the time and I wouldn't want to consume it all the time, but as place to kind of play and let yourself go to places you normally wouldn't, I think it is a lot of fun.

DR. DANA: So this is the first book you've written. And one thing I'm very curious to know is how you embark on writing, defend it to others what you're doing-- because in some ways an unpublished novel looks rather indulgent? And how you found the time to launch into something like this?

PLATTE CLARK: I think that's a good question. I had always had in the back of my mind that I wanted to be a writer. And actually it was a middle school English teacher who really first planted the seed with me, at least my first memory of wanting to do that at some point for a living. It came from a teacher pulled me aside in English class and said Platte, I really like how you write and you're really good at this. And you should really think about being a writer. And that stuck to me throughout my whole life and it stuck with me even today. And what's funny, we actually pulled out some boxes and we found a yearbook-- so this is from years and years

ago-- and it was a yearbook from this particular school. And under the teacher's photograph he had written "I'll buy your first copy."

DR. DANA: Awwww!

PLATTE CLARK: It was kind of neat, yeah. And I realized here, all these years later, I've actually now have written a book and it's published. And if this teacher was still alive I could actually fulfill that promise and that seed that he planted. So it was really kind of special. So I've always had that with me and I just made the time. And I have seven kids, I have a big family. I was working full-time but it was such a part of what I wanted to do. I spent a lot of long nights after my family went to bed and I just wrote. And I spent time on the weekends writing. And I was very encouraged by my kids and my wife, and so it actually made it easy to finally just decide to make a run for it and do it.

DR. DANA: This book is very quirky. Do you get quirky fan mail too?

PLATTE CLARK: I have gotten some pretty quirky mail from folks. And usually it tends to be drawings. So I've had a few folks draw frobbits for me. And actually this is probably less quirky and more fun but I had a whole school out in San Diego, we did a reading out there, and the class all drew what they thought frobbits looked like. And so I had 20 or 30 of these drawings of frobbits, which I thought was just hilarious. But I did have an artist draw a zombie duck around Halloween time. Very, very well done zombie duck, kind of scary looking. So that was kind of interesting. So I love how some of these images come out for folks, and especially those that are illustrators, sometimes I'll get those kind of drawings and they're a lot of fun.

DR. DANA: The second book in this trilogy, Fluff Dragon, was released last month. What can you tell us about it?

PLATTE CLARK: Well, Fluff Dragon literally picks up right where Bad Unicorn leaves off. And I think what I like most about Fluff Dragon is that it takes place in an entirely different world. Max and his friends are in the Magrus, so they're in the magical realm. It's very much a quest-like adventure. So they're taking the Codex to Rezormoor Dreadbringer's tower and they have to do this very kind of traditional fantasy quest, but it has all the crazy zaniness of Bad Unicorn in there, as well as we introduce the fire kittens, Moki and Loki. And we have two fire kittens that play prominent roles in the story and are prominent characters, and are a lot of fun.

DR. DANA: So as an author you kind of project into the future. Do squirrels eventually take over the world?

PLATTE CLARK: There is a real risk. And I think we're underplaying it. If you ever look a squirrel in the eye, there's just something that isn't right [LAUGHTER]. There's more going on. So I think as humanity we would be well-served to just be a little more cautious around these furry critters. I can stay in the third book, which is really getting out there, but we will deal with squirrels, and squirrel armies, and we'll have some fun with them.

DR. DANA: Platte F. Clark, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today.

PLATTE CLARK: Thank you so much. It was so fun. I appreciate it and it was my pleasure.

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