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# **THE JANITOR'S BOY**

## **BY ANDREW CLEMENTS**

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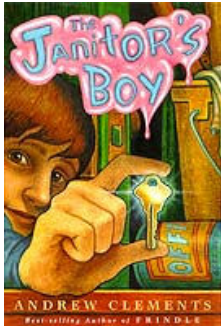
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## SUMMARY

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Jack Rankin feels like a giant letter has been branded on his forehead —"L, for Loser." Everyone has just found out that his father is the school janitor. He is so mad that he plans the perfect crime: the Bubblicious caper!

Soon Jack learns that few crimes are perfect. The caper backfires on Jack. Suddenly Jack is working for the janitor. Doing what? Scraping gum off chairs! But there are some neat things about this work. Jack finds where the master keys are kept—keys to secret places in the school.

Eventually Jack learns more about his father's past, and he develops understanding and respect for him.

<http://www.eduplace.com/readingscene/5-6/about.html>



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Andrew Clements grew up in a family that loved reading. In kindergarten, he was already a good reader. One of his favorite places was the school library. His love for books has continued, and it has led him to careers as a teacher, as an editor, and as a writer.

Andrew Clements has this to say about his time as a teacher: "... I loved reading good books with kids — the kids at school and also the four boys my wife and I had at home. As a teacher, it was a thrill to read a book aloud, and see a whole class listen so carefully to every word, dying to know what would happen next. And I was amazed at the wonderful discussions a good book can spark. Good books make good things happen in real life. They can make a big difference. So when I was given the chance to start writing for children, I jumped at it."

Andrew Clements lives in Westborough, Massachusetts. His four sons are named John, Nathaniel, George, and Charles.

He also writes early readers, picture books, and novels for middle graders. He has also helped to translate books written in other languages.

<http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/clements.html>



# BOOK REVIEW

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Andrew Clements is mining deep emotional territory here: the complex and difficult relationship between father and son. But this book contains a rare alchemy--the author is able to have Jack find independent resolution of his problems without resorting to writer's stratagems to get the parents out of the way. He brings Jack through trials to a greater understanding of himself and his father, but he does it without villains. Jack grows, not in spite of stupid or venal adults, but hand in hand with caring, wise grown-ups who know when to step in and when to step back.

The author knows schools--the student pecking order, the faculty politics, the brightly lit classrooms and dim dusty recesses of school geography. For young readers, the little details ring true and give them new insights into the world they inhabit.

Some of these details are at once so absurdly minute and sharply observed that they become hilarious. For instance, while scraping gum, Jack notices that the amount of gum increases the further the tables are from the librarian's desk, and that "the gum formed two crude, overlapping semicircles on the bottom of the table above each chair ... Simple--one semicircle for the right-handed gum stickers, the other for lefties."

Most children's books have happy endings, but this ending will bring both a grin to the face and a lump to the throat. It may not be the way the world does work, but it's the way it ought to.

Reviewed By: Matt Berman

<http://www.common sense media.org/reviews/review.php?id=1717&type=Book>



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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## Before-Reading Discussion Questions

1. This book is about a fifth-grade boy who is the son of the school janitor. How would you expect a boy to feel about having his dad work as the school janitor? How would you feel?
2. What do you imagine might happen in this book?
3. What other books have you enjoyed that are set in a school?

## After-Reading Questions

1. How did Jack feel when the other kids knew that he was the janitor's boy?
2. Why did Jack plant the gum on the music room chair? Did he get what he wanted?
3. How would you describe Jack's mother? Give an example from the book.
4. What did Jack learn about the history of his father becoming a school janitor?
5. In what way is Jack's father like Jack's grandfather?
6. Do you think the author really knows boys and schools? Find a section that supports your opinion.
7. Why do you think the author gave Jack such a sensitive sense of smell?
8. Which keys would you have chosen out of the cabinet? Why?
9. What do you know about why your parents chose the jobs they have?

<http://www.eduplace.com/readingscene/teacher/g56.html>  
<http://nene.k12.hi.us/books/janitor.html>



## **AUTHOR INTERVIEW**

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I didn't wake up one morning when I was in fourth or fifth grade and say, "I know, I know! I'm going to be a writer!" That never happened to me. I think the reason I'm a writer is because first, I was a reader. I loved to read. I read a lot of adventure stories and mystery books, and I have wonderful memories of my mom reading picture books aloud to me. I learned that words are powerful.

I also watched what was going on around me. I thought about what others were thinking and feeling. When a waitress would bring my family our meal at a Howard Johnson's restaurant as we traveled east to vacation in Maine, I wondered what her life was like. But did I write about the things I was observing and wondering about? No. Writing has always felt like hard work to me. It's still something I have to make myself do. Which is a good life lesson, don't you think? Just because something doesn't come easily for you does not mean that you can't get good at it.

I had a high school English teacher who made me really work at writing. And once when I got an assignment back, she'd written: "This is so good, Andrew. This should be published!" That made a big impression on me. Then in college I began to write a little on my own — instead of only when I had an assignment. I wrote mostly poems, and I started writing songs, short pieces about big ideas. I was an English literature major, so I wrote a lot of papers about books I had read, and my professors would sometimes comment that I wrote well. So I started feeling like I was a good writer, started feeling like I should be writing more, writing all the time. But I didn't, because, as I mentioned, writing feels like hard work.

After college I took an extra year of study to prepare to be a teacher. I taught in the public schools north of Chicago for seven years — two years in fourth grade, three years teaching eighth-grade English, and two years teaching high school English. My favorite part of teaching was getting to know all the people — kids and teachers and parents; so many people to learn about and wonder about. I didn't know it at the time, but that classroom experience would become the foundation for my writing career, an endless supply of ideas and characters and situations, some funny, some scary, some heartbreaking, and all true and real and powerful.

About two years after I stopped teaching, I went to work in the publishing business. My boss figured out I could write, and little by little, writing jobs came my way: important letters to our sales people; advertisements and marketing letters; catalog copy and author biographies. And then one day I was asked to try to write a picture book story for a wonderful illustrator named Yoshi. She wanted to illustrate a story about something that happens underwater, and I wrote the story of Big Al.

That happened in 1987. Other picture books followed. Then in 1990 I got an idea about a kid who makes up a new word. (You can read about the development of this idea on

my Web site, [Frindle.com](http://Frindle.com).) The book became **FRINDLE**, and it was finally published in 1996, and it became popular and successful. The publisher asked me to write more stories about kids and teachers and school, and I did. I think one reason these books have been popular is that school is where we spend a lot of hours during important years of our lives. School matters, and it matters all our lives.

Sometimes kids ask how I've been able to write so many books. The answer is simple: one word at a time. Which is another good lesson, I think. You don't have to do everything at once. You don't have to know how every story is going to end. You just have to take that next step, look for that next idea, write that next word. And growing up, it's the same way. We just have to go to that next class, read that next chapter, help that next person. You simply have to do that next good thing, and before you know it, you're living a good life.

<http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/authorstudies/authorhome.jhtml?authorID=2227&collateralID=10917&displayName=Biography>



## FURTHER READING

If you liked **THE JANITOR'S BOY** by Andrew Clements, you might like the following books, too!

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**OUT STANDING IN MY FIELD** by Patrick Jennings  
**THE AMAZING FRECKTACLE** by Ross Venokur  
**MY LIFE AS A FIFTH-GRADE COMEDIAN** by Elizabeth Levy  
**JUST CALL ME STUPID** by Tom Birdseye  
**FIVE-FINGER DISCOUNT** by Barthe DeClements  
**KEVIN CORBETT EATS FLIES** by Patricia Hermes  
**CULLIGAN MAN CAN** by Susan E. Kirby  
**FIFTH GRADE FLOP** by Megan Stine  
**STICKS** by Joan Bauer  
**ALEX RYAN, STOP THAT!** by Claudia Mills,  
**BASEBALL CARD CRAZY** by Trish Kennedy  
**CASEY THE NOMAD** by Susan Sussman  
**MEET THE GECKO** by Wendelin Van Draanen  
**STRING MUSIC** by Rick Telander  
**A BULLY, A BODYGUARD, AND A FISH CALLED PEPPER** by Katy Hall  
**ROBERT AND THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL SPECIAL** by Barbara Seuling  
**RAISING THE SHADES** by Doug Wilhelm,  
**WILLIE, THE FROG PRINCE** by C. S. Adler  
**APPLEBAUM'S GARAGE** by Karen Lynn Williams

### Websites

<http://andrewclements.com/>  
<http://frindle.com/>