

ONCE HOOKED, THEY'LL BRANCH OUT

If 'Captain Underpants' gets kids reading, what the heck

BY DENISE
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I'm an author, so I'm against censorship. I want to get people reading, especially my own kids. My older one reads voraciously and would even read my novels if I let him. Which I won't because they contain violence and sex, and he's 10. But my 8-year-old, now that's a harder nut to crack. Until recently, he would rather draw, build with Legos or play with Hot Wheels.

Enter Captain Underpants.

For those of you who remain blessedly ignorant, "Captain Underpants" is a series of chapter books for kids that contain several paragraphs of story per page and loads of comic-style drawings.

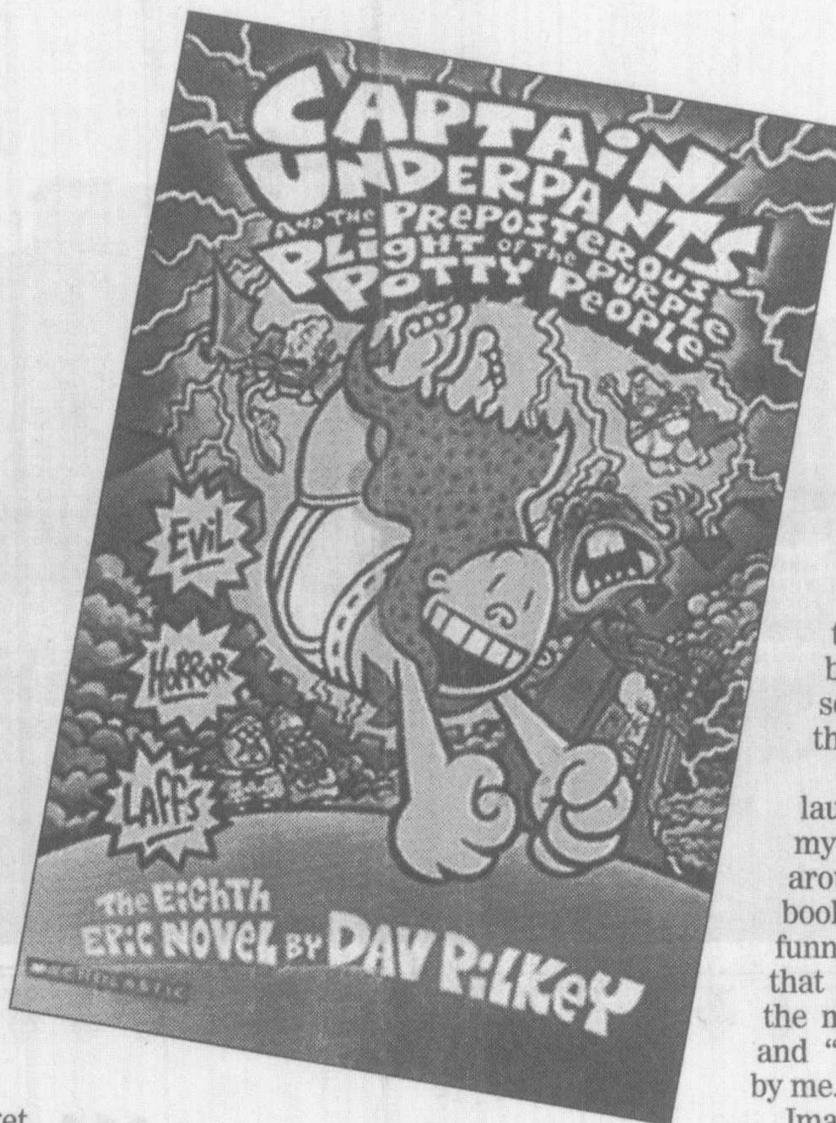
There are endless jokes about poop, wedgies, toilets, farts, boogers and diapers. Kids love these books; they sell by the millions. They're said to be a gateway book the way marijuana is a gateway drug, especially for the reluctant boy reader. The hope is that once kids get hooked, they'll branch out into "Harry Potter" and eventually graduate to the hard stuff, such as Charles Dickens and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

It seems to be working — my 8-year-old is now happily working his way through the "Goosebumps" series by R.L. Stine. But it's been a long, road-apple-strewn road and I've had to hold my nose as the process unfolds.

I'm someone who can barely say the word "fart" without blushing. (Writing it is easier.) And now I have to ask librarians if they have "Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopyants."

When I first heard about the series — my kids were 3 and 5 — my heart sank. The vulgarization of society was upon us. When would literature stop devolving?

It got worse when I actually read the books. Author Dav Pilkey (a man who undoubtedly performed armpit farts in second grade to amuse his friends) had purposefully misspelled words throughout the text. "Action, Thrills, Laffs." Laffs? What if that got



imprinted on my kids' impressionable little brains?

Then I took a deep breath. Words by themselves don't have power, I told myself. It's the symbolism we invest in them that gives words meaning. My husband, David, and I occasionally swear at home. But I've carefully explained the origins of most Anglo-Saxon expletives to the kids, with the hope that demystifying them will remove their allure. Maybe I should take the same approach with Captain Underpants. I'd read the books to the kids, discuss the jokes, point out the misspelled words, then spell them correctly. And so I did.

I also laid down some ground rules. I wouldn't buy the books new. But if we found one at a thrift shop for 49 cents, it was theirs. Checking them out of libraries also was encouraged. Soon Alex and Adrian were snickering over the books in the car and making nonstop poop jokes at the table.

This too shall pass, I thought, as I served dinner. The obsession with bodily functions would slowly wane

as they grew older.

I have sad news to deliver here: Five years later, the poop jokes at our house show no sign of going away. I suspect that some people never outgrow them. One of my friends says her husband wrestles Captain Underpants books out of her hands so he can read them to their kids.

I'm never going to laugh as uproariously as my kids, but I've come around to thinking the books are pretty grossly funny. Besides, any book that teaches a 5-year-old the meaning of "perilous" and "preposterous" is OK by me.

Imagine their future SAT verbal scores! I've also explained Pilkey's use of alliteration in the titles. The kids get that too.

Three months ago, I was at Book Expo in Washington, the big industry trade show that draws thousands of publishers, authors, agents, editors, librarians and bookstore owners each year. I was stunned to see hundreds of sensibly dressed, middle-age people walking around carrying colorful, Roy Lichtenstein-inspired tote bags emblazoned with a familiar caped figure wearing white briefs.

"Time For New Underpants," trumpeted the bags, which touted "Captain Underpants and the Preposterous Plight of the Purple Potty People." It's due out this week, and my kids and I will be among the hordes of preposterous poopy people lining up to pay full retail price.

To which, all I can say is, "Aw, crap!"

This column was written for the Los Angeles Times.