

The Math Problem

Susan Troutt

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The Math Problem brings excitement to otherwise dry concepts, with a multiplication rap and a sword for division.

Multiplication tables, fractions, and division are the bane of many elementary school students, but Jake has a pretty troublesome math problem, namely a big fat 'F' grade in the subject. In *The Math Problem*, author Susan Troutt uses young Jake's experience to walk students through earning the worst grade possible, from dealing with competitive peers, trying to hide it from parents, getting extra help, and finally to mastering the skills.

Jake's 'F' not only means he misses out on going to an amusement park with his parents—he also has to get a tutor. And when another student warns that tutors “have big monster bodies and gigantic hands to grab you if you don't give the right answer and big humongous feet to stomp you if you try to get away,” Jake believes her.

Good-natured Jake proves to be gullible throughout *The Math Problem*, and Troutt uses his tendency to take everything literally as a chance for some comic relief. When his dad tells him he has to “put his mind to” learning the multiplication table, Jake does a headstand to place his head on the page. In one scene, the tutor asks Jake to get started on his multiplication tables, and he starts piling together furniture. Likewise, when a teacher calls someone the “apple of her eye,” Jake believes the individual was once a red fruit.

Yet these attempts at humor seem too young for kids five to seven, the age when students are typically introduced to multiplication, division, and fractions in school. Jake's literalness could have been further exaggerated to add a touch of silly entertainment for young readers' short attention spans. Otherwise, even five- to seven-year-olds may grow weary of Jake's overly credulous attitude.

Supplementing the text are fifteen rudimentary sketches by Troutt to illustrate the scenes from a young student's perspective. The much more dynamic cover, showcasing a thoughtful Jake and his report card, was created by a seventeen-year-old.

Former teacher Troutt's classroom experience can be seen in the calm, instructive voice of Jake's teenage tutor Carla Laura who uses recipes, shoe size, and blocks to introduce Jake to tough math topics. Among the many valuable lessons she teaches Jake is “We learn by teaching others what we know.” Meanwhile, annoying classmate Angela epitomizes the classic know-it-all student and provides an effective foil for humble Jake.

Ultimately *The Math Problem* brings excitement to otherwise dry concepts—Jake performs a rap to teach his class multiplication, gives his teacher a poison ivy bouquet to illustrate multiples, and brings a sword to school to showcase division—and will win over young students struggling in school.

AMANDA MCCORQUODALE (May 8, 2014)

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