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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ JUVENILE FICTION

Wingnut: Operation Payback

Lindsay Baker
Vivienne Jones, illustrator
Trafford Publishing (Feb 28, 2011)
Unknown $15.99 (189pp)
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Loosely based on Lindsay Baker's own childhood in Christchurch, New Zealand, in the early 1960s, this lighthearted, debut chapter book features an unnamed, typical ten-year-old boy who narrates the story and enjoys playing pranks on his older brother while avoiding his mother's special "mom senses" that sniff out lies and problems. His life takes on real adventure when he befriends Wingnut, the odd but likeable boy at the end of the street who wears the same clothes every day, eats raw potatoes for lunch, and is nicknamed for his big, "sticky-out" ears.

Whether it is exploring drainage tunnels overrun with spiders, hunting eels in a muddy ditch, or avoiding an attack by territorial magpies, trouble seems to follow the two boys everywhere. Their biggest nuisance comes in the shape of the redheaded Shulak brothers. After pummeling Wingnut, stealing his library money, and breaking the narrator's bike, the Shulaks continue to frighten the community with violence and intimidation. Inspired by Wingnut's World War II comic, *Operation Payback*, the narrator enlists the help of fellow bullying victims, both boys and girls, to not only give the Shulaks a taste of their own medicine but stop their reign of terror once and for all.

Fraught with numerous setbacks, including trying to steal surplus parts from the neighborhood "witch," the boys' Operation Payback becomes one humorous escapade after another. But neither does Baker shy away from more serious disruptions to their idyllic life, such as the realization that Wingnut's mother is deaf, or the Shulaks's lack of empathy for animals. These observations are tempered by the narrator's comical, first-person storytelling and enhanced by black-and-white sketches that depict scenes from the boys' course of action. The inclusion of maggots, flatulence, smelly socks, a combination of urine and an electric fence, and other gross and mischievous antics add to the hilarity and ensure a widespread appeal among young male readers.

While adult readers may recall this time period fondly, many children may find that *Wingnut* crosses into historical fiction as the narrator describes listening to radio shows (since his family does not own a television like their neighbors) and brushing his teeth with a wooden toothbrush and salt. With gumboots, petrol, and the Austin A40, the author also introduces readers to life beyond North America. The novel's conclusion will leave fans hoping that Baker remembers more childhood stories to weave into adventures with Wingnut.

ANGELA LEEPER (November 7, 2012)

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