



Books by Booklist Authors: Keir Graff's *The Matchstick Castle*

Any home can become a world of imagination to a kid—though it helps when that home is an absurd, labyrinthine mansion.

BY DANIEL KRAUS

We've all heard of authors writing themselves into corners, but *Booklist* Executive Editor Keir Graff really outdid himself. It all started with *The Other Felix* (2011), a middle-grade novel that grew out of a story Graff made up to amuse his son, Felix. When Roaring Brook picked it up for publication, Graff faced a dilemma. "Now that the story was going out in the world," he recalls, "I wondered whether I should change the character's name. With the help of a baby-name book, I went through every option from *The Other Aaron* to *The Other Zachary*, but none of them felt right."

Here's the rub: Graff has another son, named Cosmo. Imagine if your sibling got a book character named after him, but you didn't. Oh, the humanity! Thankfully, Graff had a two-book deal—the ideal way to maintain household equanimity—but after a publishing shake-up, the second book lost its home. "Suddenly," Graff says, "I found myself thinking I should start putting some money aside for Cosmo's inevitable therapy bills."

Worry not, readers: Putnam scooped up the book, and the result is *The Matchstick Castle*, a magnificent romp starring luckless 11-year-old Brian, doomed to spend the summer with an uncle determined to use Brian and his cousin, Nora, as guinea pigs for his new "Summer's Cool" educational software. The town's name? Boring, Illinois. "At first I thought the joke was too obvious," Graff says, "but sometimes obvious is good, and it made me laugh, so I kept it in."

Enter (drum roll, please!) Cosmo van Dash, an exuberant, energetic Peter Pan type who lives in the adjacent forest inside the towering, patchwork, and entirely illogical "Matchstick Castle," beloved home to the blustery, self-involved, yet lovable clan of van Dashes—think *The Royal Tenenbaums* for the middle-grade set. There, the three kids battle giant wasps, wild boars, and the dilapidation of the castle itself.

It's a wonderful setting, a veritable Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory of nonsensical surprise. "I love the idea of getting lost *inside*," Graff says. "I'd stumbled across a news item about a Rus-

sian gangster who had built an enormous wooden mansion for himself but did such a terrible job that authorities condemned it. Nearly 150-feet tall, it swayed in the wind! I think this resonated with me because I remember my childhood experiences of trying to make grandiose things, only to be held back by a lack of materials."

Things are noticeably less boring for Brian and Nora after they plunge into the often dangerous but always thrilling mansion, first to help find poor Kingsley van Dash, the would-be genius author who has been lost somewhere *inside the house* for an

entire year. The second, even bigger plot point involves the city of Boring itself and the city fathers' dastardly plans to tear down Matchstick Castle.

The book makes a great case for, well, boredom. "If kids are in school 12 months a year, how will they ever get bored—and then how will they ever have adventures? I think kids are increasingly kept from their potential these days by grown-ups who are afraid of letting them fail."

Indeed, *The Matchstick Castle* conjures up those childhood memories of pretending your bed was a life raft, the ottoman was all that kept you from falling into carpet lava, and so forth. "I made a spaceship cockpit under the stairs, haunted houses in the carport—I even tried to dig a tunnel under the foundation of the garage," Graff says. "I was always racing from one project to another: I'm going to stage Custer's Last Stand in a vacant lot! I'm going to film an epic movie in Super 8!"

That irrepressible spirit fills the novel. It is *fun*—fun like a playground, fun like exploring

the woods—in a way that books for this age range sometimes forget to be. "I wish I lived here," Brian cries. "I could have adventures every day without leaving home." That's a fair description of what books can do for young readers. "One of the things that makes us human is our ability to enjoy pointless activities and nonsense," Graff notes. "The real-life Cosmo is a huge reader, and I see in him my own youthful hunger to explore other worlds through books."



The Matchstick Castle.
By Keir Graff.

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