

Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss: How an Unlikely Couple Found Love, Dodged the FBI, and Transformed Children's Literature by Philip Nel.

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 ***Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss: How an Unlikely Couple Found Love, Dodged the FBI, and Transformed Children's Literature by Philip Nel (review)***

Chris McGee

Children's Literature Association Quarterly

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 38, Number 3, Fall 2013

pp. 352-354

10.1353/chq.2013.0034

REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

Chris McGee (bio)

***Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss: How an Unlikely Couple Found Love, Dodged the FBI, and Transformed Children's Literature.* By Philip Nel. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.**

As Phil Nel talks about the legacies of Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss in this dynamite recent biography, there's a word he often repeats: "classics." Nel's story of Johnson and Krauss is not merely about two very talented individuals who fell easily in love and were startlingly productive together, but also the backstory of some pretty well-known and beloved children's books and comics of the past century. "Between them," Nel says of Krauss and Johnson early in the introduction, "they created more than seventy-five books, many of which became classics" (4). Crockett Johnson, born David Johnson Leisk, is of course most known for the *Barnaby* comic strip and *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, while Ruth Krauss is noted for such books as *A Hole Is to Dig* and *A Very Special House*, books that get discussed in great detail throughout. Nel's study is as much about how those books came to be as it is about the two creators who were never quite children's authors to begin with. If anything, Nel's enticing subtitle is a tad misleading in describing exactly his book's focus. We certainly read about some intrigue regarding ongoing FBI surveillance of the couple due to their leftist politics in both their personal lives and their works, and the book opens with an ominous knock on the door and a visit from a couple of agents. And there is certainly a portrait here of a deep commitment between two people who found their complementary opposites and best working partners, though the actual finding of that love needs just a single paragraph:

That fall, at a party in Greenwich Village or on Fire Island, the outgoing, energetic Ruth met the wry, laconic Dave. He was tall and taciturn. Seven inches shorter, she was slim, exuberant, and ready to speak her mind. Her exuberance drew him out of his natural reticence and into conversation. His calm, grounded

personality balanced her turbulent energy. They were complete opposites who felt an immediate attraction toward one another.

(54)

This excerpt, in fact, comes from a chapter titled “We Met, and That Was It!” So as much as Nel’s biography concerns two of the most decent and intriguing people I think I have ever read about—and throughout the whole book you can tell he holds the deepest reverence for both of them—the real stars here are the books they created. **[End Page 352]**

It is probably the third part of that subtitle that gets the most attention. While this is probably a sentiment you’ll come across in a lot of biographies, a running theme for Nel is that despite their influence, the breadth of their work, and the popularity of their creations, Johnson and Krauss have never really gotten the credit, or the biography, they deserve. Of Krauss, who spent a fair part of her career listening to real children and crafting lively books that captured their linguistic flair, Nel complains of how “[c]ontemporary readers take for granted that there have always been vital, spontaneous, loose-tongued children in children’s books” (6). When Krauss found a place for these types of children in her work, it seems as though everyone else started doing the same. Likewise, Johnson’s *Barnaby* set the standard for what smart, economical comic strips could do and became the expressed favorite of any number of future artists and writers, while later the Harold books seemed to particularly embody what Nel calls the “succinct expression of creative possibility” that has been a constant touchstone for young readers, of whom Nel is unreservedly one (5). As Nel suggests in his introduction, “If we measure lives through their influence and intersection with important figures and movements, then these two names deserve to be better remembered today” (7). Those important figures and their stories—including Maurice Sendak, who found true mentors in the pair—feature prominently in that thesis.

Nel follows his subjects’ two...

Book Reviews

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