

When the Darndest Things Are the Stuff of Poetry

Eric McHenry (GRS'97) produces a collection of enchanting verse inspired by his son

BY SUSAN SELIGSON

IN 2007, PUBLISHED poet Eric McHenry started a blog chronicling the random insights and endearing malapropisms of his toddler son, Evan, who once said, "If you see a vulture, don't play dead." McHenry wasn't exactly a pioneer in this respect—the parental blog is experiencing its own population explosion. But there are blogs, and there are blogs. Consider this entry, Evan's rendering of the folk classic "Early Morning Rain": "In the early morning rain, with a dollar in my hand...with some bacon in my heart, and my pockets full of ham." Eventually McHenry's exuberant cyber-scrawlings, with the author cheered on by family and friends, proved engaging enough to spawn a book, *Mommy Daddy Evan Sage*, with timeless woodblock illustrations by British cartoonist Nicholas Garland.

"The best thing about the blog is that I could transcribe things my kid was saying, and it was instantly accessible to my family, which is spread out," says McHenry, who moved recently from Seattle to his hometown of Topeka, Kans. The blog predated the birth of daughter Sage, now five. "I was struck by how enthusiastic people were. Of course I thought Evan was hilarious, but he's my son." Soon McHenry the smitten father was paying heed to McHenry the formal poet. The result is a collection of enchantingly silly verse, full of inspired wordplay reminiscent of Ogden Nash, Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss—and childhood itself:

*"I think there ought to be a guy,"
said Evan, "with one X-ray eye,
and extra fingers, who can swallow
top-secret files because he's hollow,
except that he contains a motor
that turns into a helicopter rotor
that's where his shoulder blade should be,
and who speaks Dolphin, and who's me."*

When it came to peddling the book idea, McHenry knew it could be a hard sell. A friend who's published a few books remarked that while the untitled poems were really funny and charming, publishers would be at a loss when it came to illustrating them. The first publisher passed for that reason, but the collection soon found a home with Waywiser Press, the Oxfordshire, U.K.-based house that published McHenry's first literary poetry collection, *Potscrubber Lullabies*, in 2006. "The defiant part of me felt that anything can be illustrated," McHenry says, and his editor, Philip Hoy, agreed. Artist Garland has grandchildren about the



same age as Sage and Evan, now nine. So enthusiastic was Garland about the project that McHenry wrote more poems for the collection.

"This is kind of a book for grown-ups as well as kids," says McHenry. "I've read from the book at poetry readings, and these poems are without fail the biggest hits. People are polite about my grown-up poetry."

As a child he admired many writers, from Jack Prelutsky to A. A. Milne and the great nursery rhymes. But his unrivaled favorite was Dr. Seuss. "*One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*—I never get tired of it," he says. "I really like the Grinch. These are terrific as children's literature, and as works of poetry."

McHenry (GRS'97) is back in the embrace of his extended family after a cross-country succession of teaching and writing jobs stretching back to his days in Boston, where he did a stint writing for *Bostonia* and the University's now-defunct weekly newspaper, the *BU Bridge*. These days he is teaching at Washburn University. "It's a daily miracle for me to be back in Topeka," he says. "I see my kids playing with the children of my peers—a third generation of friendship. It's all poetic to me." Fortunately for readers of all ages, McHenry is able through his craft to immortalize even the most fleeting kid moment:

*"Stand still as fast as you can,"
Sage said. So I did, and she ran
out of the room and back in.
Then she said, "I win."*

Eric McHenry, with his wife, Sonja Czarnecki, and their children, Evan and Sage.