

PRAISE FOR THE PURLOINED BOY

GOLD MEDAL WINNER!

2010 INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER BOOK AWARDS

SILVER MEDAL WINNER!

2010 MOONBEAM CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARDS



“This very competent work should appeal to middle grade readers and imagines a world in which children are stolen away from their families. Trapped in Superbia, where stolen boys and girls are watched over by guardians until they become food for the bogeys, Trevor wakes up in cold sweats every night from terrifying dreams. With the help of a spunky mouse named Zephyr and a clever girl named Maggie, Trevor escapes from Superbia and is reunited with Epictetus, a friendly slave from Superbia who is also a member of the Guild of the Sun-Eaters. After being pulled in two directions by guild members with opposing visions, Trevor finds that his greatest mission and adventures lie in the future . . . this jaunty outing—and its cliffhanger ending—could be just the beginning of Trevor’s story.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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THE
PURLOINED
BOY

THE
PURLOINED
BOY

C. R. WILEY



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an imprint of canonpress

MOSCOW, IDAHO

THE WEIRDLING CYCLE

Book 1: *The Purloined Boy*

The Weirdling Cycle continues with Book 2, *The Fey Brand* (forthcoming).

Published by Canonball Books, an imprint of Canon Press

P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843

800.488.2034 | www.canonballbooks.com

C. R. Wiley, *The Purloined Boy*, 2nd edition

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First edition 2009. Second edition 2017, published by Canon Press.

Cover design by James Engerbretson

Cover illustration by Justin Gerard

Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost

Printed in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress CIP data is forthcoming.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Caleb

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1

A HINT OF BLUE

ALL THE DOORS WERE LOCKED, ALL THE WINDOWS were latched, and everything was perfectly secure the night the bogeyman came. But none of those things mattered since he was a bogey of the old school and had come in the traditional way; which is to say, through the closet.

The closet happened to be in a bedroom, and the bedroom happened to contain a bright-eyed, happy boy. He was on the smallish side, with the smallish sort of feet that fit into footsie pajamas with plenty of room to spare. And he was all sleepy-woozy because he'd had a busy day. It had been filled

with sunshine, and watermelons, and cousins running through the sprinkler. And he was all tucked in, warm and cozy and safe, and terrifically tight, because he was loved very much.

Now when the closet began to stir, the bright-eyed boy looked across the room. His Casper the Friendly Ghost night light helped him with that. It cast blue stripes across the floor and up the walls. It made shadows too, because of the toys he'd left on the floor. But he could see the closet door there, half in the light and half out of it, with its knob shining weakly.

He caught his breath when the door began to open.

It swung slowly, but it revealed nothing. No light penetrated the black cavity it left in the wall. The doorway just gaped at him, like the mouth of a cave.

Then something shot out and disappeared into a shadow.

That got him panting. His heart started pounding in his ears. His eyes began to flit—wanting to see and not wanting. He had the urge to get up and run, but fear made him stiff as a popsicle.

Then the sound of a deep sniff came from across the room. Another sniff followed, then another. Somehow they sounded like hungry sniffs, and each was louder than the last and seemed closer.

Finally, after a rapid succession of sniffs, next to the night light, and over the edge of the bed, up it came—lurid and shadow-creased—grinning and horrible—an awful head! The boy tried to scream, but nothing came out!

“I smell boy,” the bogey said licking his pasty lips with a darting tongue, his yellowy eyes opened unnaturally wide. With an

effortless motion, he tore the covers back. “Ahhh, yeess. Looks sweet, he does. A tender morsel. Three, perhaps four. Old enough to take, but young enough to forget.”

A bony hand rose and cast a knobby shadow over the boy’s face. It was holding something. The last thing the bright-eyed boy saw was the yawning hole of a sack lowering over him.



TREVOR SAT UP WITH A START. IT WAS STILL DARK, and his burlap blanket was moist and itchy.

“Just that stupid dream again,” he said with a sigh and fell back with a thud. “Ow! Stupid bed!” It made him so mad he punched it. That was a mistake since it was made entirely of wood planks. With a moan, he put his hand between his knees and rocked back and forth. He was definitely awake now and he knew he wasn’t in a bedroom with a closet. He was in Superbia—the worst place in the universe.

Trevor didn’t usually punch things. Actually, punching things was the last thing people thought of when they thought of him. What did they think? They thought—*My, what a clumsy looking boy*. “Gangly” would have been a kinder. But he wasn’t in a place where people cared much about kindness. They also thought he looked thin. That wasn’t terribly remarkable though; most children in Superbia were thin. What tended to draw attention were his eyebrows. They seemed to be stuck in two arches. This made him look scared, and that suited him, because he *was* scared most of the time. On the plus side, they kept his eyes

wide open and helped him to see things other people missed. *He* didn't think that was a plus, though. Seeing things other people missed is what scared him in the first place.

He was staring at the ceiling now, mind wandering. To his right, a blue glow from an electric torch flickered and made shadows dance on the cavernous vaults overhead. Speaking of seeing things, he started to do that. First, he thought he saw a vase, then he thought he saw a statue, then he thought he saw a giraffe. The shadows kept shifting, becoming one thing, then another. Finally he thought he saw a bogeyman grinning at him.

He pulled the blanket over his head and shut his eyes tight. He began to feel sick. The feeling was so familiar he'd given it a name.

"Oh no, it's Mr. Queasy; I think I'm going to throw up."

He managed not to. When his breathing had returned to normal, he pulled his blanket back again and looked left and right and saw hundreds of beds just like his, stretching into the shadowy distance. In each bed was a child.

He whispered to the boy on his left, "Drake, you asleep?"

"Yes," Drake moaned.

"Drake . . . do you ever have (gulp) dreams? You . . . you know . . . of someplace else?"

"Nope."

"I do." He started to tell him about them.

"Shut up! I don't want to hear about your stupid dreams."

"But, what . . . what about . . . you know . . . the rumors? About Olton? They say they have families there . . ."

Drake raised himself on an elbow and leaned toward him.

“Shut up, I said. If you don’t, Meno might hear and he’ll pound you again, and this time I won’t stop him, got it?”

A vision of knuckles and a nasty face passed before him. “Okay.”

“Good. Go back to sleep,” Drake said and rolled over.

Trevor tried to, but his eyes kept opening on their own. He turned over and saw Maggie Blaise through her red hair. She was a new kid, transferred from Hall 57, she’d said. He had only known her a couple of weeks, but he really liked her, and she even seemed to like him.

“Maggie, wake up. It’s me, Trevor.” No answer. *Must really be asleep*, he decided.

Just then, something caught his attention beyond her at the far end of the hall. It was the slave who watched the children at night, reading at a tall desk. The old fellow wore a patch over one eye. What caught Trevor’s attention was that it was turned up. Even across the room, he could see that the bad eye was bleached white. It shone eerily by the glow of his electric torch.

Weird, Trevor thought.

Unexpectedly the morning bells rang, and the curtains opened with a swoosh to let the dusty light of a Superbian morning pour in.

A Guardian entered and swept through the aisles. “Up, up, up, children! Up you go!” he chirped.

Hundreds of kids rolled out of bed and began to mill around, getting ready for the day, throwing on clothes, and making

beds, while more Guardians in white robes whisking entered and passed among them like ghosts.

Trevor fumbled with his blanket, working to tuck under the corner in the way he'd been shown a hundred times. *Tight folds, flat creases*, he reminded himself. He stepped back to inspect his work; *no, it wasn't right. The corner was supposed to form a triangle*. He hoped they wouldn't notice, just this once. He felt a presence behind him. He looked up with a swallow. A long, thin face stared back at him.

"Is that the best you can do . . . ahh, what's your name?"

"Trevor, First Guardian Glaucon," Trevor said, looking into a pair of eyes that reminded him vaguely of empty tea cups.

"Did you say, *Trevor*? Speak up."

"Yes sir, Trevor."

"Oh, yes. Trevor. I remember you," Glaucon said to the open air. "Why don't we just tattoo numbers on them? Much easier that way. No trying to remember these confounded names . . . I think I'll bring it up at council," he finished, sounding pleased with himself.

Trevor hoped the Guardian had forgotten him, but no such luck. "That bed is a disgrace, I say, a disgrace," Glaucon said, curtly. Swooping down, he pushed Trevor aside and, in what seemed a couple of motions, he produced a perfectly made bed. "There, did you see? That is how it is done," he said, then glided away in search of other disgraceful beds.

"Yes, First Guardian," Trevor said, feeling relieved and stupid at the same time.

At the end of the hall children were lining up for breakfast, and Trevor joined them. He got behind Drake, and Maggie came up behind him. Each picked up a bowl and walked past tables where adults ladled out gruel. Then they joined some kids at one of the tables.

“I hate this stuff,” said Maggie. “Why can’t they give us something good to eat?”

“Like what?” Trevor said.

“Like real food. Like bacon or eggs or even toast.”

“Oh, you’re making it all up,” said Drake, rolling his eyes.

Trevor had a vague idea of what she was talking about. “What are eggs?” he asked.

“Mmm, eggs are really tasty. They come in a shell that you can crack, and inside there’s a little yellow thing called a yolk. You can cook ’em lots of ways. I love eggs.”

“You’re lying,” a heavy voice said from down the table.

It was Meno, and food was dribbling from a corner of his mouth. He had two bowls of the stuff, one of which he had apparently taken from the skinny, sad-looking kid to his right. He glared at Maggie with beady little eyes set in a massive red face. Amazingly, he had no neck; his head just seemed to swell from his shoulders like a huge pimple. Trevor hadn’t seen him there. Suddenly he didn’t feel hungry.

“I’ve heard that eggs are slave food and so’s that other stuff. It can’t be good if slaves eat it,” pimple-head said.

“How do you know?” Maggie snapped. “You’ve never even had eggs!”

“Neither have you!”

“Have too!”

“Have not!”

“Yes I have, you big lummoX! My mother used to make them for me! Oops!” Maggie’s eyes went wide, and her hands flew to her mouth.

Everyone at the table froze, spoons halfway to mouths.

Just then, a Guardian glided by and the children looked down quickly. Silence. The only sound was the sound of spoons scraping on bowls.

After the Guardian was out of earshot, Trevor leaned over and said, “You have a mother?”

“Hey, you better shut up about that stuff,” said Meno. He motioned with his thumb at the Guardian. “You’re lucky they’re here. If they weren’t, I’d pop you,” he said, holding up a brick-sized fist at Maggie.

“*Oooo, I’m sooo scared,*” Maggie crooned.

“You better be. And you, punk,” he said to Trevor. “You better not get us in trouble again. If you do, I’ll crack your head open like one of those stupid eggs she’s talking about.”

“Uhhh, okay,” Trevor said, visualizing himself in a headlock.

The bells rang, and mercifully chaos broke out as everyone went to class. Trevor and Maggie lost the others in the bustle.

“Why do you let that moron talk to you that way?” Maggie said.

“What way?”

She stopped and looked at him incredulously. “Like you’re dirt, or something!”

“Oh, that,” he mumbled.

Suddenly, Trevor felt a need to put the best face on it. He wanted Maggie to like him.

“I, ummm . . . I . . .”

She kept looking at him. Blood rushed to his face, and his eyes fell. To his relief, the press of kids going to class swept them apart.



THEY WERE REUNITED OUTSIDE THEIR CLASSROOM. Trevor wanted to tell her he wasn't dirt, but when he saw Meno, a screaming need for invisibility made him duck for cover. They found some seats in the back, and he slunk down in his chair.

A screech pierced the air, and an iron door at the front of the classroom opened to let in a lumpy pillow. It was their teacher, Guardian Medea. She was wore the standard white robe, but her immense girth filled it so completely that every fold of her ample body was outlined for a defenseless world to see.

“Good morning, class!” she sing-songed, as she surveyed the students through her smudgy glasses.

“Good morning, Guardian,” the class answered in unison.

The scrape of a hundred chairs pushing back was followed by the sound of a classroom full of kids, marching in place. Trevor and Maggie joined in, swinging their arms, raising their knees high. It was time for the national anthem. Every voice sang and this is what they said:

Superbia's really great!
Get up now, don't be late!
Together now, let us state:
Superbia's really great!

The tune was just as awful as the words, but Medea enjoyed it. Her cheeks bounced and jiggled at either end of a broad grin, and she pumped her pudgy fists in the air at the *really great!* part.

Maggie glanced at Trevor and giggled.

After about a dozen verses of the same thing over and over, somehow they all knew they were done and sat with a thump.

"Very good, children! Very good!" the Guardian said. "How very fortunate you are to live in Superbia—the envy of the world! It is my pleasure to lecture you once again on the glories of our beautiful city." She walked to a lectern and plopped down a stack of yellowed papers. "Today we learn about my favorite subject: sewage treatment!"

Maggie nudged Trevor. "Sewage treatment?" she whispered. Trevor shrugged.

"It is all so very, very interesting, how pipes connect every building in the city, and how they all lead eventually to the great sewage works below! It all works together and each part makes its contribution! Delightful! Simply delightful!"

What it was about times like this, Trevor couldn't say, but his mind became difficult to control. It was as if it had a mind of its own; and while Medea droned on about the wonders of filtration, it got up and left the building.

It went far, far, away until it came to a grove of shaggy trees where a little white house with shining windows sat contentedly. He walked right up the steps and into the house through a screen door. The aroma of baking bread welcomed him and he looked around at a strange, yet familiar room. It was so bright and cheery, it made him happy just being in it. In a corner a big, overstuffed chair beckoned to him.

Two figures walked in. They were radiant; so bright, in fact, Trevor couldn't look directly at them. But he liked what he could see, and he could tell that they liked him. It occurred to him that it would be very nice for one of the bright people to read him a book. He looked up and saw one on a shelf high overhead. He extended an arm and reached for it. *Just a little higher*, he thought. He stretched his arm as high as he could. *That's it, almost got it—*

“Yes, Trevor Upjohn, what is it?”

He was back.

His hand was in the air, and every eye was on him. Maggie had grabbed his arm and was trying to bring it down. “What are you doing?!” she hissed.

He sank down in his chair, and an all too familiar feeling of dread, like a lump of ice, was moving from his stomach up to his throat. He was sweaty all of a sudden.

“I, uhh, I don't know.”

“Nonsense, child. You have a question. Go ahead. Ask it.”

“Well,” he stammered. “I was wondering. Ahhh, can I go home?”

Someone screamed. Chairs scraped the floor, and kids edged away.

Medea sagged and braced herself with the corner of a desk. An alarm began to sound.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it!” Trevor said in a panic.

“Trevor, you know we don’t use naughty words in school! How could you?”

She began talking to herself at this point, “Oh my, oh my, why is this happening to me? I had such a good record, too. Spoiled. Spoiled by a stupid boy! I hate boys.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Guardian,” a girl said. “He’s always saying things like that.” She glared at him.

And she wasn’t the only one. Trevor looked around. Everyone was, too. Meno was whispering to a tousle-headed stick of a kid named Willis.

“What should I do?” Medea kept saying, trying to collect her wits. “They’ll be here soon. What should I say?”

The clip of boots sounded down a hall. Everyone went quiet. *Clip, clip, clip* went the boots. Everyone got quieter. *Clip, clip, clip*: the boots arrived.

The door screeched again. A tall, balding figure carrying a clipboard stepped into the room. His face was hollow—hollow cheeks, hollow eyes. He scanned the room.

“Ah, Mr. Gourmand, how kind of you to come,” Medea said, with a nervous laugh. “Behavior Modification is always welcome here!”

The man gave a solemn nod.

A kid spoke up. "Please Guardian, don't make us go with him! He's a bogeyman!"

"Now, now, bogeymen are our friends. Besides, we mustn't hurt Mr. Gourmand's feelings. He's taken time out of his busy schedule to pay us a visit."

That's right, bogeymen are our friends, Trevor reminded himself. He sunk down further in his chair, hoping the bogey wouldn't notice him.

"Who was it?" the bogey asked.

"Mr. Gourmand, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. Everything's under control, I . . ." Medea's voice trailed off under his gaze.

"Who was it?" he asked again.

Fifty fingers pointed at Trevor.

"Really," said the bogey, with a grin. The hairs on back of Trevor's neck rose.

"I'm sorry, but everyone here has been contaminated," the bogey said, not sounding sorry at all. "Immediate action is necessary. All the children must come with me for therapy."

Moans rose from across the room.

"Therapy! How wonderful!" Medea said, wringing her hands. "How I remember my therapy sessions with fondness! Well, class, off you go!"

"Where are we going?" someone asked.

"To the gates," the said the bogey.

"How exciting!" Medea effused, with a pained expression. "A field trip! How lucky for you all. Have a good time. Bye, bye!"

Everyone began to form a line behind the Behavior Modifier. Before long, they were filing out the door.

The air was thick with blame. Trevor didn't look at anyone. Maggie managed to come up next to him and give his hand an encouraging squeeze.

"Why can't I keep my big mouth shut?" he said as they left the room.

But just before he stepped out, Trevor looked back. He saw Medea mumbling to herself and staring blankly into space.



ONCE OUTSIDE, THEY ENTERED A FOREST OF SMOKE-stacks, some rising hundreds of feet into the air. Plumes of smoke belched out of them to feed heavy clouds, blanketing the sky as far as could be seen.

Their hall was just one of hundreds like it in that part of Superbia. The dull, boxy shapes, with their giant numbers painted on their sides, retreated into the distance. Each one contained hundreds of children. But no other children were outside just then.

Beneath the shadows of the stacks, Trevor's class huddled together like a little, black beetle. They crawled along behind the white form of Behavior Modifier Gourmand. No one said a thing, which was just as well for Trevor, since no one had anything nice to say to him.

Maggie looked over and gave his hand another squeeze.

"What was I thinking?" he thought. And yet, and yet—he liked his thoughts. He liked them much better than Superbia.

He knew he shouldn't. Everyone said so. But that house, it was so nice. And the people who lived in it, he liked them—a lot.

Who are they, anyway? A naughty question came into his head. He'd had it a million times. *Were they his parents? Were they his mother and father? No! he told himself. Don't even think it! It only makes things worse!*

He went on scolding himself like that, all the way to the gate. That was a lot of scolding. Superbia was a big place.

The gate was set in a tall wall and was made of iron bars that looked like black teeth. At the Behavior Modifier's signal, a man began cranking a wheel and the gate slowly rose.

They passed through the opening and out onto an empty road that stretched over a barren steppe.

Gourmand now surveyed each child. When he came to him, Trevor saw him lick his lips.

Finally, the Behavior Modifier cleared his throat and put a hand over his heart.

"My dear little morsels," he said. "My heart breaks whenever I hear that someone has used one of the naughty words. The naughty words are bad, very bad. They are a sickness. When a child hears one of the naughty words, he begins to see things and hear things—strange, crazy things and imaginary people. Now, isn't that terrible?" (Heads nodded.) "That is why they are forbidden!"

Everyone looked at Trevor.

"Sorry, guys."

"Now for your therapy, my tender ones. I am sorry to say it will hurt," the bogey said with a smile. "But it will be good for you."

Then he pointed away from the city, toward the horizon.

“There, do you see it?”

Trevor squinted. In the far distance, he thought he could see a dark line where the brown of the earth met the gray of the sky.

“What do you think that is?”

“Is it the Blackwood?” a girl ventured.

“That’s right, my little morsel, that is the Blackwood. And every awful story you’ve heard about it is too true. It is full of hungry things. Why, it would swallow you itself, if it could,” the bogey said, eyes widening.

The children pressed up to each other.

“Once that wood filled the whole world, but we bogeys pressed it back! And someday, dear children, if we just keep at it, we’ll be rid of it for good!”

Teeth flashing, he went on. “The mind that made those woods made the naughty words, you know. That is why you must be cleansed of them! Now, for your therapy.”

Looking at the ground, he pointed at a little twig with a single feeble leaf. “Look! The Blackwood sends its shoots to the very gate of Superbia!”

His hand went to a pocket and he pulled something out. He threw it on the ground, and instantly smoke shot up and began spreading.

Everyone started coughing and Trevor began feeling odd.

“Help me, children! Help me save our city!” Gourmand cried.

With a hiss, a thousand roots shot out of the ground. They began climbing the wall and ripping out chunks of stone. One

as big as a tree trunk wrapped itself around Gourmand and lifted him into the air.

“Fight, my tender ones! Fight for your city!” he shouted down at them.

Something came over Trevor and he felt hatred, hatred like he’d never felt before. He wanted to hack and pull and cut. Others must have felt it too, because children were running around frantically fighting the maniacal roots.

But, before Trevor could join in, a wind rose and swept some of the smoke away. It was a fresh wind, and it was as though a spell had been broken. Suddenly, everything was just like it had been before. The roots were gone, the walls were unharmed, and Behavior Modifier Gourmand was back on the ground. Everyone stood blinking and dazed.

Trevor liked the wind, but the bogey didn’t.

Gourmand looked toward the horizon with a twisted face.

Trevor followed his gaze and there—on the edge of sight—over the Blackwood, the gray of the sky had thinned a little, and brightness could be seen. A small, wispy hole even appeared in the clouds, and Trevor saw something he’d only seen in his dreams. He saw a hint of blue.

2

EPICETUS

IT WAS ALREADY DARK WHEN THEY GOT BACK TO THE hall. Supper had been the hope of every stomach. They just missed it. That meant going to bed hungry, the phrase, “We saved dinner for you,” being unknown in Superbia.

Standing by his perfectly-made bed, Trevor knew his prospects were bad. He tried not to look in Meno’s direction, but it seemed like his eyes were made of steel and Meno was a pimple-headed magnet. When they fell on the neckless one, they saw Meno staring right back at him. The bully mouthed—*You’re dead!*