the Weird World of Dan Gutman

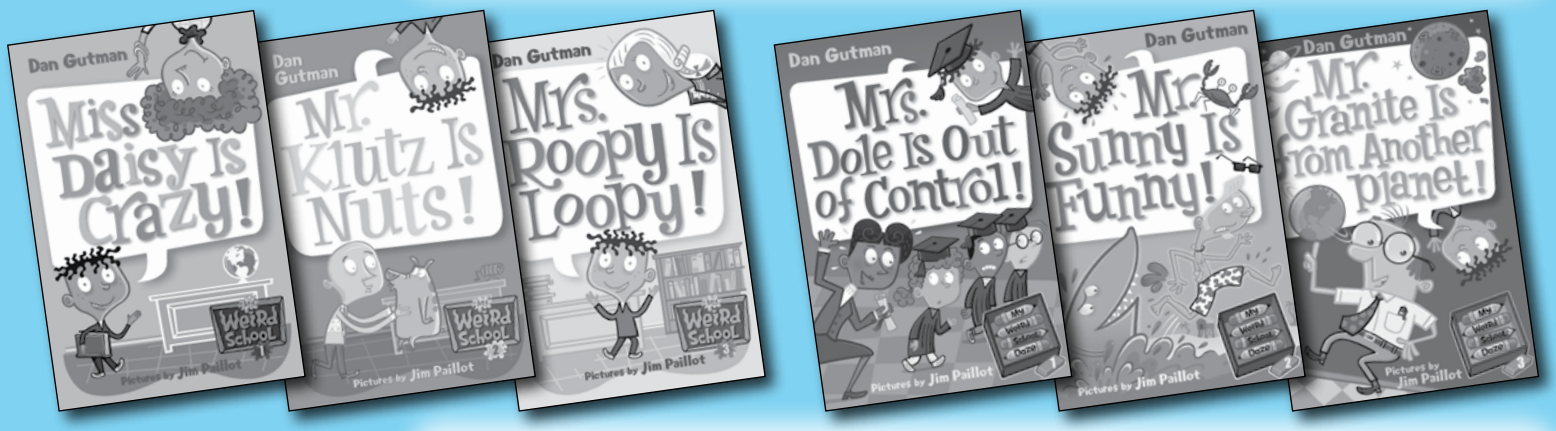
A Teaching Guide

The Weird World of Dan Gutman

Carol Van Hook

About the Author

Dan Gutman has written many weird books for kids, including the My Weird School and My Weird School Daze series and the Baseball Card Adventures series. Born in New York City (a very weird place) and raised in New Jersey (even weirder), Dan graduated from Rutgers University with a degree in psychology. He now lives in New Jersey with his weird wife, Nina, and two weird children, Sam and Emma. A favorite among young readers, Dan has won sixteen state-sponsored children's choice awards for his books. Visit Dan Gutman's weird website at **www.dangutman.com**.

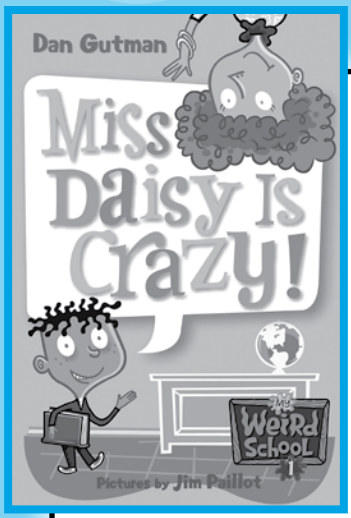


About My Weird School and My Weird School Daze

In the My Weird School series, wisecracking second grader A.J., his loyal pals Ryan and Michael, and his archenemy, smarty-pants Andrea, meet a set of wacky teachers at Ella Mentry School—the weirdest school ever. Bonbon-eating teacher Miss Daisy hates school and wants to watch TV all day. School custodian Miss Lazar zooms around on a scooter brandishing a toilet plunger. Science teacher Mr. Docker drives a potato-powered Spudmobile. The weirdness continues when A.J. and his friends graduate to the third grade and encounter a new pack of zany and hilarious teachers in the My Weird School Daze series.

About the Guide

Teachers and their students have gone crazy for the books in Dan Gutman's My Weird School and My Weird School Daze series. Engage your students with reading by using this guide to incorporate these hilarious chapter books into your curriculum. Introduce students to each series with the discussion questions for *My Weird School #1: Miss Daisy Is Crazy!* and *My Weird School Daze #1: Mrs. Dole Is Out of Control!* on the facing page. Then further explore the many cross-curricular applications of the My Weird School and My Weird School Daze books by teaching the language arts, social studies, and math and science activities that follow. As you work with the books, encourage your students to be as silly and creative as possible, because in Dan Gutman's world, the weirder the better!



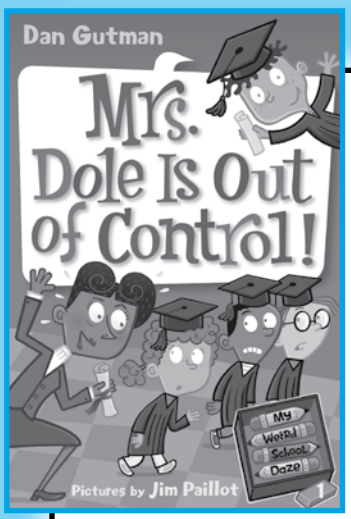
My Weird School #1: Miss Daisy Is Crazy!

About the Book

In the first My Weird School adventure, A.J. and his friends meet crazy Miss Daisy, a second-grade teacher who loves bonbons and needs her students to teach her how to add, subtract, and read!

Discussion Questions

1. On the first page, A.J. says, "I hate school," but he ends up liking a lot of things that happen there. How do you think A.J. really feels about school? Why do you think he feels this way? How are your feelings about school similar to or different from his?
2. A.J. says that kids can learn everything important from TV (p. 2). Do you agree or disagree?
3. Study Jim Paillot's illustrations on pages 8–9 and 18–19. How do these illustrations help tell the story?
4. At recess one day, Ryan has the genius idea to buy Ella Mentry School (p. 35). Who do you think owns Ella Mentry School? Who owns your school? How do the owners decide who runs the school?
5. Why does A.J. think football players are "really dumb" (p. 49)? Why does Boomer Wiggins respond the way that he does when Miss Daisy asks if football players are dumb? Why might people assume that athletes aren't smart? What do you think of these assumptions?
6. Why is Miss Daisy so wacky? What wacky things do your teachers do? How does their wackiness help you learn?



My Weird School Daze #1: Mrs. Dole Is Out of Control!

About the Book

When A.J. and his classmates finish second grade, Ella Mentry School's out-of-control PTA president Mrs. Dole plans a graduation ceremony that includes farm animals, fireworks, President Bill Clinton, and an eternal flame.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Ryan embarrassed when his mother, PTA president Mrs. Dole, visits the school? Why isn't Andrea embarrassed by her mother's school visit? Why do parents visit your school, and how do you feel when they visit?
2. What is an exaggeration? A.J. often exaggerates, saying things like "My parents have been married for like a century" (p. 18) and that things take "a million hundred hours" to do (p. 48). What exaggerations do you frequently use? Why do people exaggerate?
3. A.J. sometimes makes generalizations about "the girls" and "the guys." Do you think that all girls act the same? If so, how? If not, how do they act differently from each other? What about boys?
4. What are footnotes? How does Dan Gutman use them in the story?
5. Why do people think things A.J. says are funny when he means them to be serious? Do people ever think serious things you say are funny? How does this make you feel?
6. What are some of the things that A.J. considers to be weird at his school? What weird things happen at your school? What makes something weird?

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Language Arts Activities

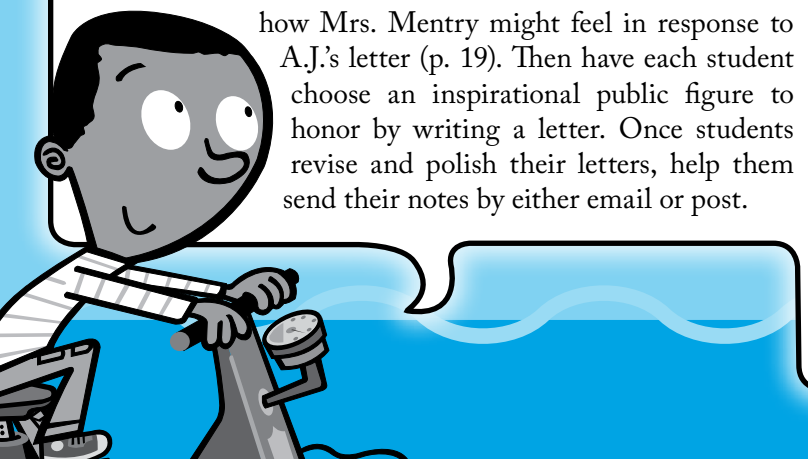
Teachers' Secret Identities. A.J. thinks that some of his teachers have secret identities. In *My Weird School #7: Mrs. Cooney Is Loony!*, A.J. becomes convinced that Mrs. Cooney is a spy, while in *My Weird School #12: Ms. Todd Is Odd!*, he suspects that Ms. Todd is really a robot. Have each student write a story that begins: "I think my teacher has a secret identity, so I . . ." Once students write and revise, collect their stories in a Teachers' Secret Identities anthology.

The Sound-Alike Word Wall. While preparing for second grade graduation in *My Weird School Daze #1: Mrs. Dole Is Out of Control!*, A.J. mixes up two words that sound similar: antique and unique (pp. 19–20). Have students construct a Sound-Alike Word Wall by creating index cards for words that they frequently confuse. On the cards, students should include definitions for the words, along with illustrations to act as visual clues that will help them remember what the words mean.

Encyclopedia Poems. A.J. writes a poem called "Animals Are Weird" with facts he's learned from Andrea's encyclopedia in *My Weird School #16: Ms. Coco Is Loco!* (pp. 77–78). Assign topics of interest for students to research. Then ask students to use research facts to compose their own encyclopedia poems. Host a class poetry slam, complete with café-like seating, fruit juice, and pastries, at which students may share their fact-based poems.

Up, Up, and Away! In *My Weird School #9: Miss Lazar Is Bizarre!*, Miss Lazar is a custodian who acts more like a superhero: She zooms around on a scooter and saves Principal Klutz from falling off the school roof with the aid of her trusty toilet plunger. What makes someone a hero? Discuss people in your students' lives who, like Miss Lazar, have superhero qualities. Design a class superhero based on students' real-life heroes. Then have students write and illustrate comics starring this newly designed superhero.

The Letter Is in the Mail. When A.J.'s class studies Mrs. Ella Mentry in *My Weird School #8: Ms. LaGrange Is Strange!*, the students write letters to the school's namesake. Facilitate a discussion about how Mrs. Mentry might feel in response to A.J.'s letter (p. 19). Then have each student choose an inspirational public figure to honor by writing a letter. Once students revise and polish their letters, help them send their notes by either email or post.



Figurative Expression Dictionary. A.J. often interprets figurative expressions literally. For example, in *My Weird School #2: Mr. Klutz Is Nuts!*, Andrea says, "That's the last straw!" and A.J. replies, "There are plenty of straws" (p. 81). Discuss the difference between literal and figurative meaning and brainstorm a list of common figurative expressions. Then create a Figurative Expression Dictionary by assigning each student a phrase to define figuratively and illustrate literally, thereby highlighting the weirdness and humor of language.

That's a Rap. Mr. Hynde writes and performs his own raps in *My Weird School #6: Mr. Hynde Is Out of His Mind!* Have pairs of students take turns performing Mr. Hynde's raps (pp. 24–25, 29–30, 50–51, 93). Then have students write and practice their own songs. When students are well rehearsed, host an *American Idol*–style event in your classroom so that students can wow one another with their Mr. Hynde–inspired songs.

Little Word, Big Word. In *My Weird School #2: Mr. Klutz Is Nuts!*, Principal Klutz explains a trick for remembering the correct spelling of *principal*: The phrase "your principal is your pal" reminds you that *principal* is spelled with *p-a-l* (p. 18). Write words students may have difficulty spelling, like *balloon*, *beautiful*, *friend*, *separate*, and *weird*, on index cards. Identify smaller words within these words. As a class, create phrases using the small words to help students remember how to spell the big words. For example, "be a beautiful person" reminds you that *beautiful* begins with *b-e-a*, while "Friday is at the end of the week" reminds you that *friend* begins with *f-r-i* and ends with *e-n-d*. Write your class's phrases on the appropriate cards and hang the cards from a Little Word, Big Word mobile.

Secret Language Stories: Translated. When Mrs. Kormel says "bingle boo," she means "hello," and when she says "limpus kidoodle," she means "sit down" in *My Weird School #11: Mrs. Kormel Is Not Normal!* (pp. 8–9). Instruct small groups of students to invent their own secret languages and also to create translation guides. Each language should include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Have students write short stories in their secret languages. Then have groups swap finished stories and accompanying translation guides and then translate each other's stories into English.

The Million Pages Challenge. Principal Klutz challenges A.J. and his pals to read a million pages in *My Weird School #1: Miss Daisy Is Crazy!* Issue a similar challenge, offering students something wacky as a reward. Give students a visual way of measuring their progress, like Miss Daisy's giant temperature mural, and be prepared to hand over the reward when your students meet your challenge!

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Social Studies Activities

What You Never Knew About the Holidays. A.J. and his classmates learn the history and folklore of Halloween (*My Weird School #13: Mrs. Patty Is Batty!*), Thanksgiving (*My Weird School #19: Dr. Carbles Is Losing His Marbles!*), and Valentine's Day (*My Weird School #20: Mr. Louie Is Screwy!*). Like the teachers at Ella Mentry School, present your students with unusual information about several holidays. Then have small groups create displays about what they've learned, incorporating a variety of display components, such as posters, dioramas, maps, artwork, multimedia presentations, or music.

Historical Figures on Tour. Mrs. Roopy and Mr. Macky dress up as historical figures in *My Weird School #3: Mrs. Roopy Is Loopy!* and *My Weird School #15: Mr. Macky Is Wacky!*, and your students can do the same. Have each student read a short historical biography and then impersonate the biography's subject. Students should practice presenting facts about their historical figure as well as reciting a famous quote of his or hers. After creating costumes, take your famous people on tour to other classes to show off their presentations.

Museum of Hanging Garbage. Present students with information on the quantities of items that enter local landfills and recycling centers each day, as well as information on ways these facilities affect the physical environment. Then reread what Ms. Hannah says about creating art out of waste and the Museum of Hanging Garbage in *My Weird School #4: Ms. Hannah Is Bananas!* (pp. 18–20, 29–31, 48–52). Using materials from your classroom that you'd usually throw out, create art for your own Museum of Hanging Garbage. Invite parents to your exhibition opening.

Trick-or-Treat Map Competition. In *My Weird School #13: Mrs. Patty Is Batty!*, Michael maps his neighborhood and plans the best route for treat collecting. Help students map their own trick-or-treat routes, providing labels for landmarks as well as a key for the symbols they use. Award prizes for "Creepiest Map," "Most Accurate Map," and "Most Potentially Treat-Lucrative Map."

Singing and Citizenship. Mr. Louie is a fan of social protest songs from the sixties, but when A.J. and his friends protest Miss Daisy's wedding in *My Weird School #20: Mr. Louie Is Screwy!*, Mr. Louie makes them stop. Use this event to introduce a discussion of citizen protest. Explain situations in which citizens have chosen to protest, as well as government reactions to these protests. How might citizen protest be effective, and how might it be ineffective? Teach students some sixties protest songs, and then challenge students to invent their own.

The Weird Spanish-English Phrase Book. In *My Weird School #14: Miss Holly Is Too Jolly!*, Miss Holly teaches students weird Spanish words like *el peluquín* (toupée), *el salvavida* (lifeguard), and *el inodoro* (toilet), in case her students want to tell somebody that the lifeguard's toupée fell in the toilet (pp. 10–11). In collaboration with a Spanish teacher, help your students create their own Weird Spanish-English Phrase Book. Students should illustrate their wacky phrases using Jim Paillot's illustration on page 11 for ideas.

So, Mr. Ex-President, Now What? In *My Weird School Daze #1: Mrs. Dole Is Out of Control!*, former president Bill Clinton is one of the speakers at the second-grade graduation. Use this story event to launch a discussion of what ex-presidents do. Then have students collect information on several presidents' dates in office and notable contributions to democracy after leaving office. With the information collected, instruct students to craft a So, Mr. Ex-President, Now What? banner. As the school year draws to a close, have students make So, [Student's Name], Now What? posters on which they list goals they'd like to accomplish after leaving your classroom.

Flying Flags. Like the kids in *My Weird School #12: Ms. Todd Is Odd!*, have your students dress like flags for Flag Day. Before the holiday, present images of flags from around the world and assign each student a country's flag to dress like. On Flag Day, when students arrive wearing their flag colors and symbols, have students guess which country each person represents. Take photos and hang them on the walls to "fly" your classroom's flags.

Holiday Pageant. In *My Weird School #14: Miss Holly Is Too Jolly!*, A.J. and his classmates study winter holidays and then put on a holiday pageant. In collaboration with your school librarian or media specialist, have students collect information about various cultures' winter holidays. Develop a holiday pageant program that includes music, short skits, and costumes inspired by your students' research. Perform your pageant for parents and other students.

French Foods Banquet. In *My Weird School #8: Ms. LaGrange Is Strange!*, A.J. and his friends learn about French cooking. Arrange for your class to research the history and importance of these American favorites: French fries, French salad dressing, and French toast. Then have students research foods commonly served in France. As part of the research process, ask each student to contribute a French recipe to a class recipe book.

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Math and Science Activities

Is Mr. Klutz Nuts? In *My Weird School #2: Mr. Klutz Is Nuts!*, Mr. Klutz demonstrates a physics experiment by dropping different items at the same time to see which one lands first (pp. 49–54). Hypothesize with your class whether this experiment would have the same result in real life. Assist students as they decide on the materials and method they'll use to replicate the experiment. Perform the experiment, record the results, and write a class conclusion. Have students compare their results to Mr. Klutz's and decide: Is Mr. Klutz nuts?

Keeping Up with the Times. A.J. knows how to tell time on an analog clock, and he looks forward to three o'clock because that's when school is over (*My Weird School #8: Ms. LaGrange Is Strange!*, p. 57). With your class, develop a list of important times that students need to read on a clock. Have students make guides that show the correct placement of the clock hands for all of the important times. Prompt students to use these guides to help them read analog clocks.

Why? Journals. Mr. Docker, who is featured in *My Weird School #10: Mr. Docker Is off His Rocker!*, promotes scientific inquiry by urging students to be curious and ask "why questions" (p. 15). At the beginning of each science unit, suggest some "why questions" that scientists might ask about the topic you're studying. Then have students keep Why? Journals in which they record their own questions. As students research or perform experiments, have them write answers to their questions in their journals.

Crazy Animal Natural History Museum. A.J. and his classmates learn about all kinds of crazy animals in *My Weird School #21: Ms. Krup Cracks Me Up!*, including wild yaks, moose, skunks, and opossums. Generate a list of crazy animals that interest your students. In collaboration with your school librarian or media specialist, help students collect information on these animals. Then have students make natural history displays with models of the animals in their natural habitats and informative labels. Invite other classes to visit your Crazy Animal Natural History Museum.

Beat Your Record! A.J. and his classmates calculate the number of minutes they spend doing math problems in *My Weird School #2: Mr. Klutz Is Nuts!* (pp. 46–47). Select a daily classroom activity and instruct students to time how long it takes them to complete the activity each day. Do this for several days and challenge students to beat the previous day's record each time. Then assist students in calculating the total number of minutes they spent doing the activity, as well as the total number of times they beat their own records!

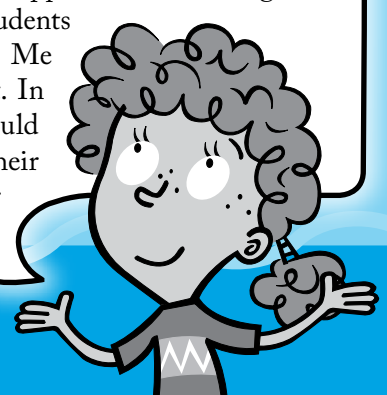
Illustrated Math. Illustrator Jim Paillot provides visual examples for mathematical concepts, like circumference in *My Weird School #1: Miss Daisy Is Crazy!* (p. 43) and a set of items in *My Weird School #12: Ms. Todd Is Odd!* (p. 54). Using Jim Paillot's illustrations as inspiration, have students craft an illustrated math glossary. As you introduce new math concepts throughout the year, have students add accurate yet wacky illustrated entries, and watch your math glossary grow!

What Are Headlights? When Mrs. Cooney examines A.J.'s head in *My Weird School #7: Mrs. Cooney Is Loony!*, he thinks she's checking for headlights, but she's actually looking for head lice! Present students with information on these creepy crawlies, as well as ways to prevent infestations. Guide students as they create What Are Headlights? multimedia presentations, and encourage them to include cool images and sound effects.

NERD Inventions. Mrs. Yonkers's company New Electronic Research Development (NERD) uses technology to solve problems in *My Weird School #18: Mrs. Yonkers Is Bonkers!* Instruct students to pretend that they work for NERD and are charged with the task of coming up with new inventions to solve current science-related problems. What inventions do they dream up? Once students sketch and label their inventions, include their creations in a NERD newsletter.

Summer Vacation Time! In *My Weird School Daze #2: Mr. Sunny Is Funny!*, A.J. calculates the amount of time he'll have without Andrea over summer vacation (p. 6). How long is summer vacation for your students? Begin by having students count the number of weeks between the end of the current school year and the beginning of the next. Then have students convert the weeks into days, hours, minutes, and seconds. How does the length of your students' summer vacation compare to A.J.'s?

Science and Me. A.J. figures out that volcanoes are like overflowing toilets (*My Weird School #9: Miss Lazar Is Bizarre!*, pp. 4–6) and that Egyptian builders could move pyramid rocks in the same way he is able to move vegetables by building a lever out of a spoon and a fork (*My Weird School #8: Ms. LaGrange Is Strange!*, pp. 87–88). Drawing on A.J. for inspiration, instruct students to write reflective Science and Me paragraphs for each science unit. In these paragraphs, students should reflect on a way the subject of their studies is like something in their everyday lives.



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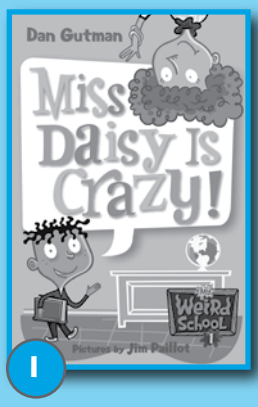
My Weird School

How many of A.J.'s weird adventures have your students read?



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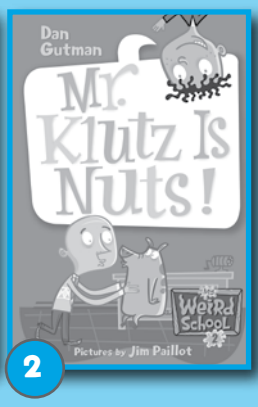

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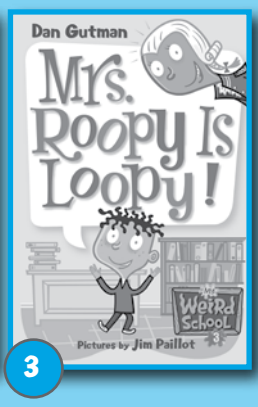

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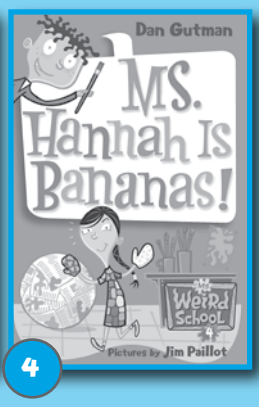

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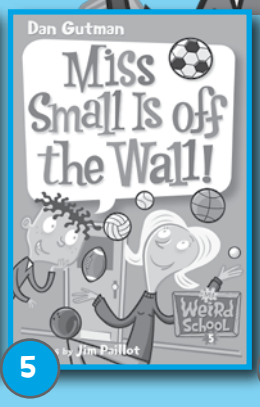

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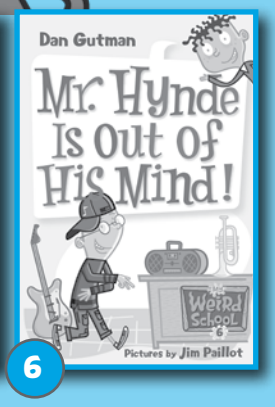

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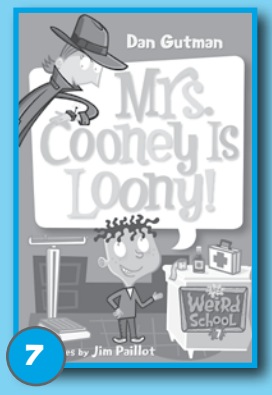

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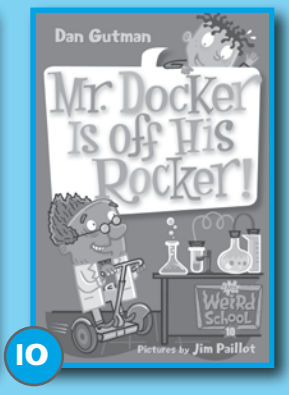

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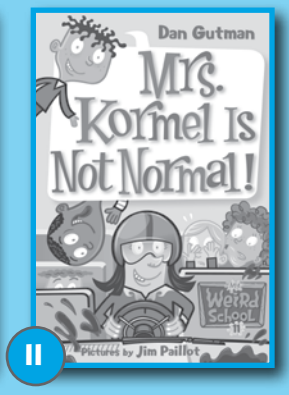

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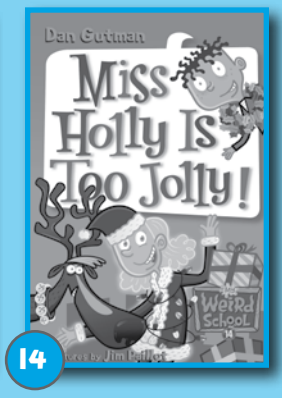

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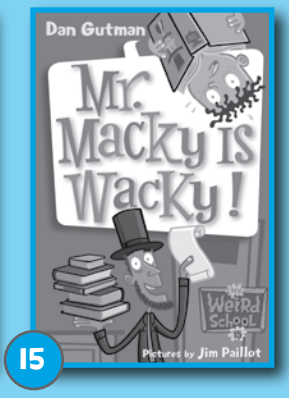

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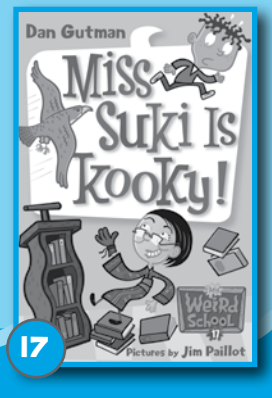

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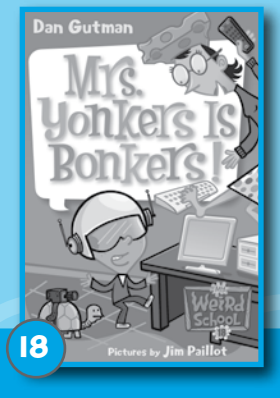

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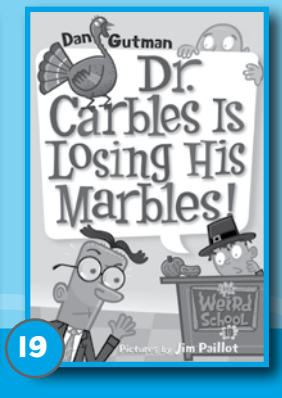

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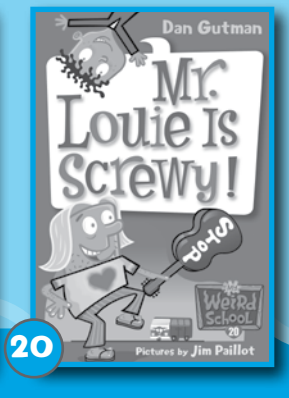

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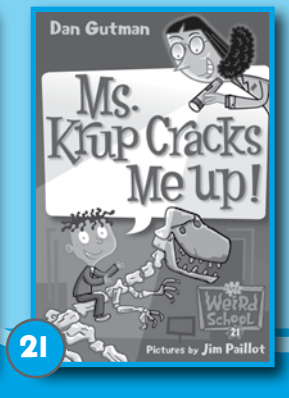

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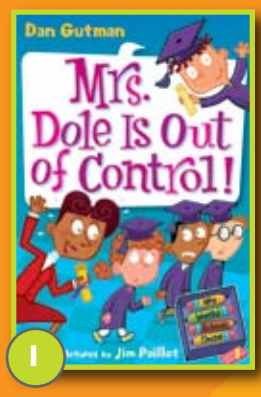
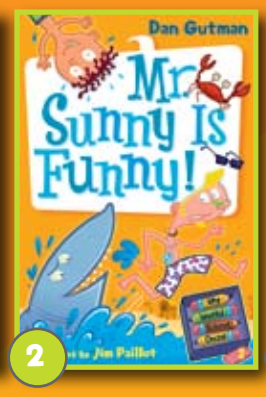
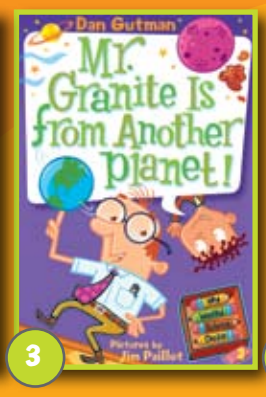
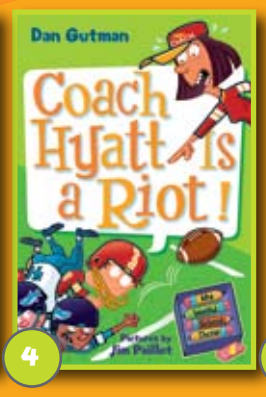
My Weird School Daze

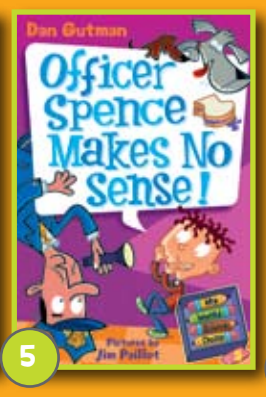
The hilarious high jinks at Ella Mentry School continue!

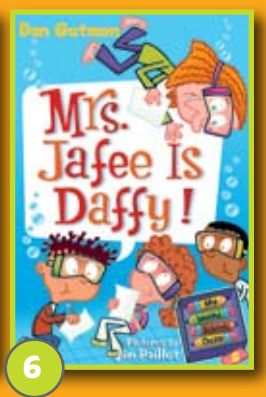






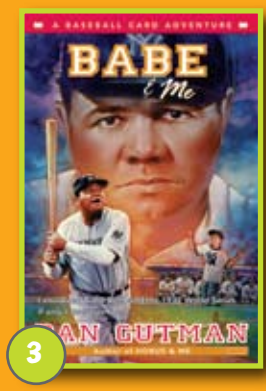


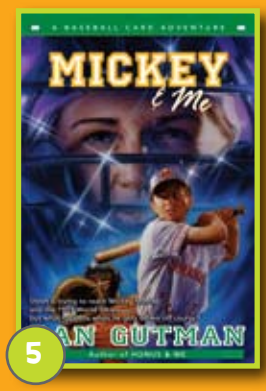


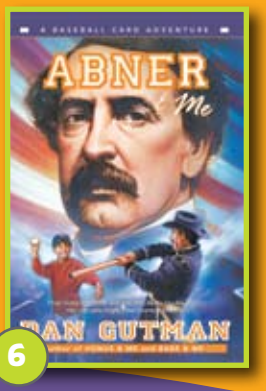


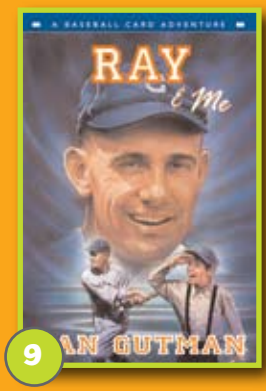
Baseball Card Adventures

For more Dan Gutman fun, try these action-packed books!









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