

One World, Many Stories

Kid page-turners: youngster fiction from three local authors

BY TAYLOR KORSAK



The Glimmers Starring Ruby Shroo, by Robert Agnello, \$8.99; available at Words Bookstore, Maplewood.

Sometime between trips to the beach, barbecues and slip-'n'-slides, parents will read with their kids this summer. In Maplewood and South Orange, three residents have written colorful and energetic narratives for children that playfully mesh fantasy and reality. The stories transport children to a magical world while continually rooting them in the real one. A lesson is learned and an opportunity created for parents to connect with their child.

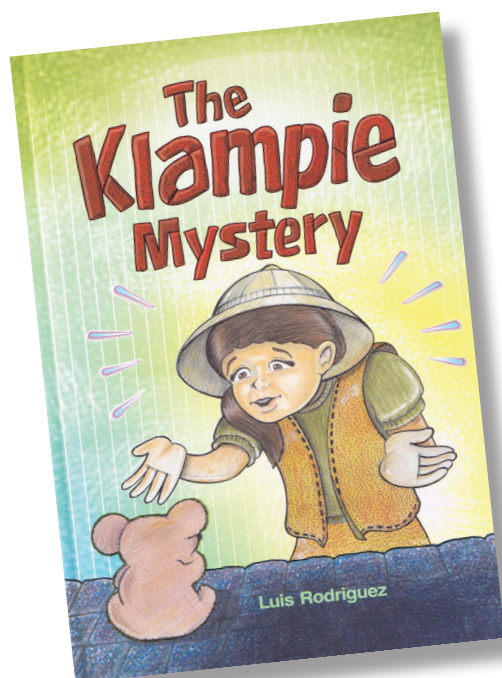
For Maplewood resident, Emmy winner and owner of On The Lamb Productions Robert Agnello, in this world there is real darkness and real light – “dimmers” and “glimmers,” as he has named them in his new book series called *The Glimmers*. In the first installment, *The Glimmers Starring Ruby Shroo*, truth, respect and hope are characterized as “glimmers” or “little beings of light that float through the air and make everything good glow,” and are born when others make the right choices out of love and respect for others. Ruby Shroo, the title character, is a glimmer of truth dramatically born out of a young boy’s courage to be honest with his mother.

Nick Meola’s illustrations are big and bold and each page is saturated with color. “I wanted a bright, happy and wonderful book to correspond with what the glimmers were all about,” says Agnello. “I think we totally achieved that.”

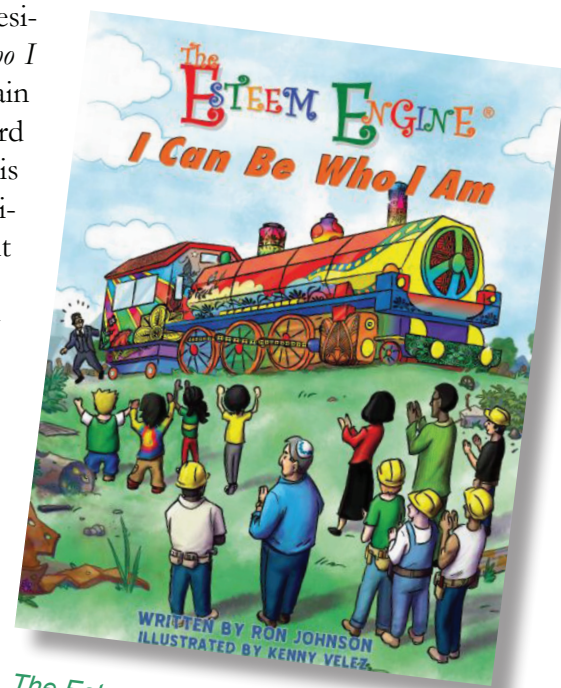
Agnello says recent stories of bullying across the nation inspired him to create a narrative of self-worth for children and young adults. “We are faced with choices every day and the choices you make in your life dictate who and what you are and become,” says Agnello, whose next installment will include glimmers of respect and tolerance.

In another fantasy world, a talking train becomes “The Esteem Engine.” In South Orange resident Ron Johnson’s *The Esteem Engine I Can Be Who I Am*, train conductor Señor Rivera remembers his train in its old form: a rusted hunk of metal in a train yard “spending life down in the dumps.” Together with his friends, and a group of young rascals, Señor Rivera rebuilds its chassis and self-esteem to make it the charming, positive, jokestertrain it is today.

This character-driven story for elementary school children has fun, psychedelic illustrations by Kenny Velez and rhythmic passages that are great to read aloud. Johnson says he wants children to learn to “be who they truly are; a matter of self-identity and self-comfort” and for parents to “learn to unlearn” – that “parenting should not be treated as a family heirloom. Just because our parents parented the way they did, does that mean we must repeat what may be the same mistakes?”



The Klampie Mystery, by Luis Rodriguez, \$14.95.



The Esteem Engine, I Can Be Who I Am, by Ron Johnson, \$16.95; available at Words Bookstore, Maplewood.

Johnson drew his inspiration from his daughter, Sage, and his wife, Patricia, as well as from childhood education expert Barbara T. Bowman and the late psychologist and *Sesame Street* content developer, Gerald S. Lesser. And from the book's own characters: "The ensemble of Esteem Engine characters inspires me," he says. "I feel they were the writers of this story, not me."


A child's first experience with the written word can significantly contribute to a growing appreciation for reading. And that is the driving hope of South Orange resident, Luis Rodriguez, author of *The Klampie Mystery*. "Before anything, I want to bring some joy to young children. Once this is achieved, I also hope that as a result, Klampie contributes a little bit to promote love for reading, love for books."

In *The Klampie Mystery*, a young girl named Samantha develops a short but sweet friendship with a koala. On a trip to Australia with her family, Samantha brings her stuffed koala, who she names Klampie "because his arms could clamp onto almost anything, just like a real koala." When they arrive, an actual koala winds up in the family's car and replaces Samantha's stuffed Klampie. When Samantha finally realizes it, she's shocked – as is everyone else on the plane back to San Diego.

"The story has some incidental pieces of information, which is just a little bonus," Rodriguez says of the various facts he included about koalas and Australia. (For instance, Samantha learns koalas aren't bears.) But, he adds, "The main idea is to make young readers smile and enjoy the story."

Klampie is intended for children aged 4 through 8. "Some parents have told me they read it to younger children in multiple sessions, a little bit at a time," says Rodriguez. "Older children may read it by themselves at their own paces. Each spread represents a little chapter where readers can pause to continue reading at another time."

Whether it's developing a child's literacy, teaching a morally and socially conscious lesson, or bonding between parent and child, children's books are a useful tool – especially during a time when every second is one of learning – and these local authors have created narratives to meet that need.

On those hot and steamy days this season in downtown Maplewood or on the long, hilly streets in South Orange, staying inside and flipping through a children's book bursting with color will sound pretty cool. 

Taylor Korsak will always remember her favorite childhood read: Norma Jean, Jumping Bean, by Joanna Cole.



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