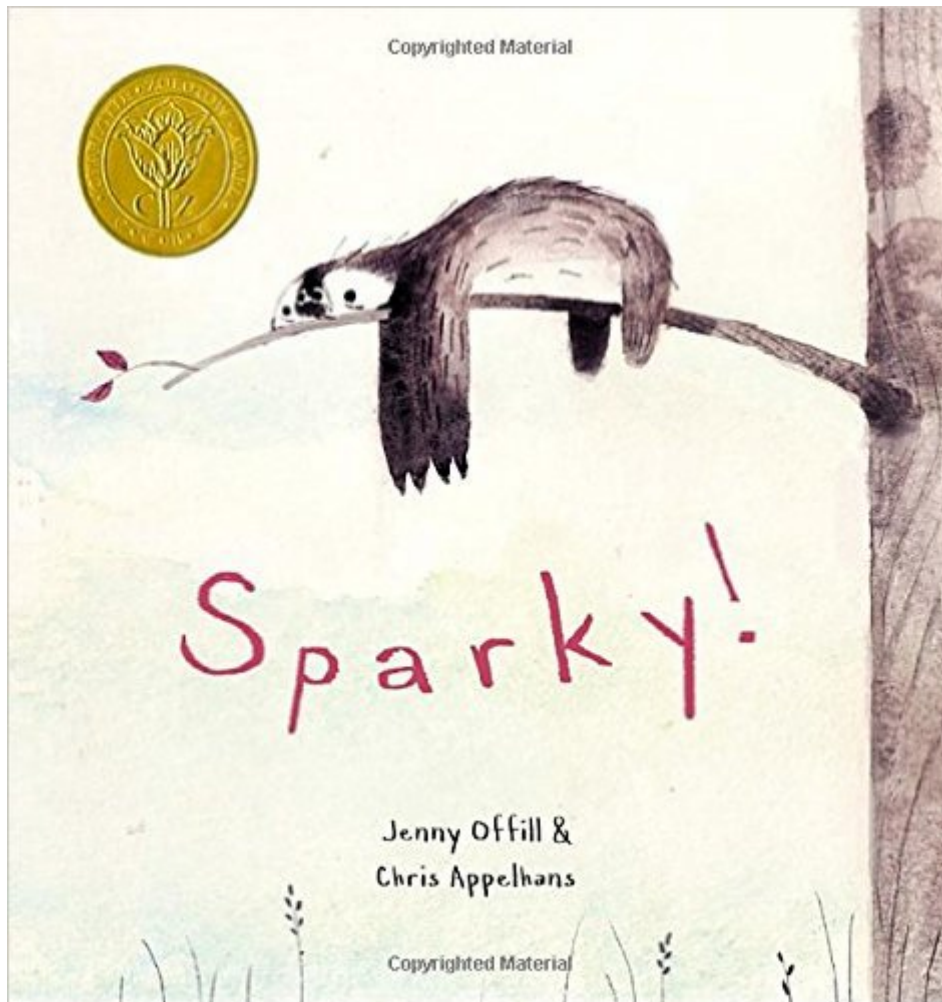


The book was found

# Sparky!





changing that. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, the sublime and subversive Jenny Offill pairs with first timer Chris Appelhans to give us a subdued but strangely content little tale about that most classic of all friendships: a girl and her sloth. "You can have any pet you want as long as it doesn't need to be walked or bathed or fed." Our heroine's mom probably regrets telling this to her daughter but it's too late now. The minute she said it the girl headed straight to the library and there, in the S volume of the Animal Encyclopedia, she learned about sloths. In no time at all one appears via Express Mail and she names him Sparky (thereby giving away the fact that she harbors impossible sloth-related dreams). Her know-it-all neighbor Mary Potts is not impressed, so our heroine determines to show off her pet in a "Trained Sloth Extravaganza". Naturally, this does not go as planned, but even after everyone has left and it's just her and Sparky, she can't help but love the little guy. With a quick tag to his claw she makes it clear that he is it. "And for a long, long time he was." I was talking with some folks about picture books earlier today and in the course of our conversation I discovered something interesting about the way I judge them. While art is definitely something I take into account when I decide to love or loathe an illustrated work for kids, it's the writing that always tips the balance. I'd read some of Offill's picture books before and while I liked them fine they did not inspire in me the kind of rabid fan response I've seen other librarians profess thanks to *17 Things I'm Not Allowed to Do Anymore*. Sparky! is different. Here, the book cuts to the chase right at the start. Our heroine (who remains unnamed throughout) makes it clear that her raison d'être is to have a pet. When Sparky arrives she pours herself into his care, never mind that he's about as needy as a houseplant in this regard. There was something so enticing about her cheery demeanor, even in the face of cold hard facts. Her mother right from the get-go also has this world-weary air that suggests more than it tells. As for the repeated lines of "a promise is a promise", it's a line that clearly reflects our heroine's worldview. The combination of wordplay and story definitely made this one of the more interesting picture books I'd seen in a while. Illustrator Chris Appelhans comes to us from the world of animation, having worked on such films as *Coraline* and *The Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Comparisons to Jon Klassen, another animation escapee, are not entirely out of left field either. Like Klassen, Appelhans prefers a subdued style with a limited palette. He knows how to get a great deal of humor out of a character's lack of movement and emotion. The sequence where the girl plays everything from King of the Mountain to Hide-and-Seek with Sparky would not work particularly well unless Appelhans utilized this technique. Add in the funny little story and I'm sure you'll hear a lot of folks comparing this to *Extra Yarn* or something equally wry. That

said, Appelhans is his own man. Emotion, for example, is something he alludes to beautifully. Note the bags of worry under Sparky's eyes. I've never quite known what to call these, but they show up periodically in books and comics for kids. They're great character reference points. The kind of bags that Charlie Brown would sport. Here, they suggest more about Sparky's state of mind than anything else. Note that Publishers Weekly was not charmed by Sparky! In fact, Publishers Weekly was pretty much bummed out by the whole experience of reading the book at all. Talking about it, they dowsed their review with words like *glum*, *lonely*, *miserable*, and (my personal favorite) *burdened with pathos*. A reading of this sort happens when you walk into the book expecting it to cater to your already existing expectations about what *pet* books should do. Where PW found the book depressing, I found it smart and serious. Yep, Sparky looks mildly perturbed for most of the book, but that's only when he's taken out of his natural environment. The very last image in the book of him finally getting to lie in his tree next to his girl is the only time we ever see him smile. As for the girl herself, she knows perfectly well what she got herself into and why her dream of getting him to perform fell through. And she's a happier person than the seemingly self-assured Mary Potts, that's for sure, having a fair amount in common with Calvin from Calvin & Hobbes. As such, this isn't the downer fare you'd necessarily expect. The School Library Journal review, for that matter, did a small bit of hand wringing over whether or not children would come away from this book with the clearly misbegotten understanding that having a sloth for a pet would be fun. Since this is a work of fiction (and the underground sloth procurement market remaining, for the most part, elusive to their needs) I hardly think we need fret about whether or not kids will take the wrong message away from Sparky! After all, it makes sloth ownership look just about as appealing as whale ownership in Billy Twitters and His Blue Whale Problem. Sparky is awfully cute but as our heroine is quick to learn, he's not about to do much of anything he doesn't want to do. The only time he does something the heroine suggests, it's when he munches slowly on a cookie she's offered him (and then proceeds to take back when it's clear he's going to take all day with it). It's a much quieter picture book than those full of glam and glitz, cluttering up our shelves. Like its color scheme Sparky! suggests that pet ownership is not a predictable path. Or maybe it's saying that imposing your will on others, particularly the barely sentient, isn't the way to go. Or maybe it's just a funny book about a funny sloth. That works too. However you look at it, there's no denying that though it's a silly idea (telegraphed by the silly contrast between the title and explanation mark and the cover image) with

a slow, steady feel and delightful premise. You read into the book what you want to read into it. For me, that means reading into it a great story with beautiful art (that final sunset is a doozy), and likable characters. What more need you in life? For ages 3-7.

The little girl in SPARKY! is promised a pet - "as long as it doesn't need to be walked or bathed or fed." The helpful local librarian introduces the girl to the sloth, which in addition to being the laziest animal in the world, fulfills all of her mother's requirements. When the sloth arrives, she names him Sparky and, once delivered to his tree in the back yard, he doesn't wake for two whole days. Though Sparky might not be like most pets - he doesn't fetch or roll over, but he is really quite good at playing statue - she loves him all the same. Adorable illustrations and a quirky story about a girl and her pet sloth, SPARKY! is sure to become a new favorite!

While the focus of this book is Sparky the sloth, his story would not be possible without the girl who ordered him by mail and gave him his name. Like many kids, the kid narrating this tale REALLY wants a pet, but her (seemingly workaholic) mother insists it has to be low-maintenance, and on a trip to the library, she learns about sloths, a furry creature (that's the basis for many of the Bigfoot legends, that's just my personal theory) that meets all the criteria--Low Maintenance-Doesn't Need to be Walked-Can't cause various mischief(Which one neighbor in the book appreciates)While Sparky can't do what other pets do, his girl learns to see the best in him in ways no one else can. When you give a dog treats, they'll eat them all, but with Sparky, you share a cookie, meaning he gets half, than you get the other half!While first person narration is common in YA and some middle grade fiction, it's RARE to see first person narrator in a picture book when most often the reader is an adult (or an older tween or teen sibling), but Jenny pulls it off with noticeable skill. Not only from a technical standpoint, but also sounds like the kid narrate this story.The impressionistic, clay/watercolor hybrid illustrations by Chris Appelhans bring quirky warmth to the experience. Kids with nontraditional pets will get a kick out of Sparky, a sloth that despite being slower than turtles, and more sedate than your eccentric cousin thrice removed after Thanksgiving has more to offer than what the cover image above leads you believe.

I really wanted to love this book. Illustrative style is awesome! Unfortunately, the story is much to be desired. A few facts about sloths is the only take-away here. Otherwise, I'm reading my daughter a book about a girl who is insecure about her pet sloth because of a judgmental, bratty friend. Sadly,

would not read again.

This story has potential to be really cute, I just felt that it was a little too cryptic and disjointed for preschool or kindergarten aged students. Although the idea of loving a "different" type of pet is a great idea, it wasn't portrayed clearly enough. A snooty side character is presented, but her negative comments are glazed over and her bad attitude had to be explained to my child as she didn't understand that this was the antagonist in the story. The true test is that both my two year old and four year old had no interest in reading the story again and it was promptly delivered back to the library.

Before I taught 5th grade I thought upper grades didn't like picture books and using them in the classroom would never work. I was mistaken. Sure they play it off like they're too cool and want nothing to do with them...but when I pull a book out and have them sit down and I start reading, not a SINGLE eye is looking anywhere but at the book! What fakers! This is one of those books they adore, and for good reason. It's a cute story about a girl who tricks her mom into getting a pet sloth. The sloth is always sleeping and this makes for a story that is just silly. This book is quirky but cute and when you add the watercolor pictures it just makes the whole thing darling. I definitely recommend this book.

[Download to continue reading...](#)

Sparky! Joe and Sparky Get New Wheels: Candlewick Sparks Joe and Sparky, Superstars!:  
Candlewick Sparks Sparky (Dog Diaries Special Edition) Sparky the Fire Dog

[Dmca](#)