

# Daniel Pinkwater's *Bushman Lives*: To become an artist

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Daniel Pinkwater's *Bushman Lives* (2012, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, hardcover, \$16.99) introduces us to Harold Knishke, a young teen living in Chicago in the 1950s. Harold's love/obsession with Bushman, the famous gorilla who lived at the Lincoln Park Zoo and with whom he is convinced he shared a special connection gives rise to the greeting "Bushman Lives!," which he shares with his high-climbing friend, Geets, and everyone else.

Largely unsupervised, Harold wanders the streets of Chicago, enjoying the sights of the city and allowing the days to take him where they will. Early on, Harold is kicked out of his flute lesson by his teacher Mr. Pfiff, who declares that Harold does not have any musical talent at all. It's a friendly, funny conversation, and Pinkwater's love of accents encourages reading it out loud.

Harold, flute lesson money in his pocket, meanders to the Art Institute of Chicago where he's exhorted to visit the Willem de Kooning painting, *Excavation*, by a girl sitting on the steps. There follows a beautiful passage in which Harold is hit with Art Appreciation. Sucked in by the painting, he sees intricate layers adding up to a story full of potential and drama. He leaves the museum and views the world with new eyes. He loves the new view, disorienting as it initially is, and determines he's going to be an artist.

Pinkwater's description of the change in Harold is well-wrought and the reader willingly follows along as the young man's level of observation and thought deepens. Still light in attitude, but now with a purpose, Harold's narrative is one of maturation.

Harold continues to wander the city, and Pinkwater's appreciation for iconic landmarks gone by which used to be part of Chicago daily life is put to excellent use. Harold's descriptions of the neighborhoods,

monuments, characters and foods have the tone of one friend introducing another to the best things in life.

Unlike many, Pinkwater does not use the past as a battering ram against the present, but as an incentive to find the interesting things in one's own era and environment, to look beneath the surface. Here, the 1950s are a time of expansion. For Harold, being among beatniks and other assorted outsiders and artists provides fertile ground for exploring and developing his own new-found talent.

Pinkwater has a way of introducing fantastical elements with an earnest matter-of-factness. Harold's voice carries the reader along at a pretty fast clip, and when the strange things start happening, it's often not until a few paragraphs later that one stops and thinks, "Well, now that's odd." It takes a deft hand to pull off such an effect.

While *Bushman Lives* is part of a series including *The Neddiad*, *The Yggsey*, and *The Adventures of a Cat-Whiskered Girl*, and characters from these (and other) Pinkwater books do make appearances, the book is self-contained. The mystical and weird elements do not depend on having read the others for coherency. Harold's world is fully drawn.

Daniel Pinkwater has long been an advocate of children's literature and the importance of art. In this book, he pointedly takes up the theme of art as an essential part of a person's development. Coming at a time when many schools have eliminated the arts due to a combination of budget cuts and a focus on test results and when the very existence of public museums is under attack, *Bushman Lives* gives a surprisingly poignant reminder that art is crucial to gaining an understanding of the world.



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