

KATE KLISE *on writing*

THREE-RING RASCALS BOOK ONE:

THE SHOW MUST GO ON!

Where Have All The Atticus Finches Gone?

I ran into my high school prom date at a Christmas party a few years ago. Jim is now a Catholic priest, which tells you everything you need to know about our prom night. We went to the dance in his family's station wagon. There was no intimate physical contact or alcohol consumption. Instead, we talked about life and books. I was home shortly after midnight.

The good thing about that kind of prom date is that when you run into the guy years later, there's no awkwardness. You can simply pick up where you left off, talking about life, books, and the challenges of finding your way, whether you're a priest like him or a children's book author like me.

When I saw Jim at the party, he asked an interesting question: Why are all the authority figures in popular culture so ridiculous and incompetent? "Like Homer Simpson?" I asked. Jim nodded. "Because he's funny," I said. "And because it's good to question authority, especially when figures of authority abuse their power and privilege." (I wasn't talking about Jim, of course, but about some other men in his profession.)

Then I watched *Downton Abbey*, and I understood what Jim was talking about. Seeing Hugh Bonneville portray Lord Grantham



Photo Credit: Dawn Shields

KATE KLISE and **M. SARAH KLISE** have collaborated on numerous middle-grade and picture-book projects. Their most recent series, *43 Old Cemetery Road*, has been nominated for reading awards in nearly twenty states to date and is a Junior Library Guild selection. Kate Klise does more than seventy school visits a year, and the pair's novels and picture books are promoted on their website: www.kateandsarahklise.com. Kate lives in Norwood, Missouri, and Sarah lives in Berkeley, California.

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reminded me how much I love a story with a central character who's strong and wise and good. Think of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Andy Griffith in the old *Andy Griffith Show*. Even Mrs. Piggie-Wiggle in Betty MacDonald's charming series was kindly and benevolent in her own kooky way. These characters, along with my parents, were the authority figures when I was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. They knew more about life than I did, and I was happy to laugh with them, not at them. I admired their gentleness born of wisdom.

Thinking about these characters made me want to write a series of children's books with a Lord Grantham-Andy Griffith-Atticus Finch-type figure at its center. Enter Sir Sidney, founder and owner of Sir Sidney's Circus and star of my new series, *Three-Ring Rascals*. (Why a circus setting? Because most nine-year-old readers would rather have a lot of animals than a lot of money or an English manor.)

Like Atticus Finch and Andy Griffith, Sir Sidney is a prince of a man. He grooms Leo the lion with only the finest Italian brushes. He has fresh peanuts flown in for Elsa the elephant. Sir Sidney is even kind to the mice and crow who travel with the circus, eating all the leftover popcorn from the concession stand.

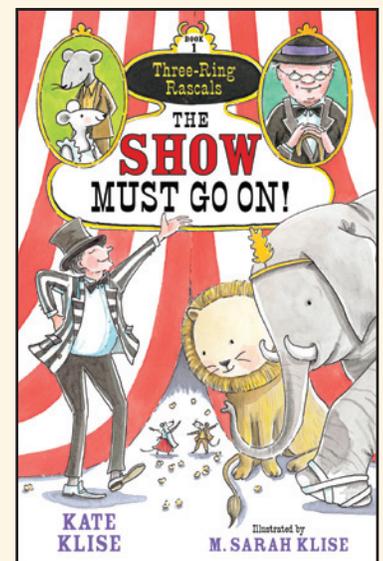
Of course, every story needs a villain. Where *Downton Abbey* has Thomas, the evil footman, my new series has Barnabas Brambles, a greedy con artist who convinces Sir Sidney to let him manage the circus for a week. (Spoiler alert: The animals will survive, thanks to the can-do mice and crow who save the day.)

While I was working on the first book in this series, my eight-year-old nephew Milo told his mother, my sister and illustrator **M. Sarah Klise**, and me that he wanted a story about "a mean baddie." We promised to make one for him, and I hope Milo thinks this is it.

Barnabas Brambles is ridiculously bad. Characters like him are delicious for both readers and writers. But if I've done my job, Milo and other young readers will see that as fun as it is to read about "baddies," it's also fun to enter a fictional world where the person in charge is kind and wise and good. As an adult, I find this kind of story enormously comforting. For young readers, I think it's critical. How would we know what to look for in a lawyer (or a mentor or a friend) if we'd never met Atticus Finch? What kind of woman would I want to be if I'd never read *Miss Rumphius*?

I still think Matt Groening is a genius for creating Homer Simpson. But I'm also grateful to Julian Fellowes for creating another kind of father in *Downton Abbey*. And I'm especially grateful to Father Jim, my old friend and prom date, for reminding me how wonderful it is to spend time with a really good guy, whether in fiction or in real life.

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