

THE UNIVERSE BUILDERS

BERNIE AND THE PUTTY



STEVE LEBEL



Awards and Recognition

*** GRAND PRIZE WINNER ***

Writer's Digest Self-Published e-Book Awards (2014)

*** FINALIST ***

Stargazer Literary Awards (2015)

Praise for *The Universe Builders*

"Highly recommended. One of the most unique and well-written YA books I've ever read."

Judge, *2nd Annual Writer's Digest Self-Published e-Book Awards*

"...a top pick for teens and adults interested in ... unique stories filled with unpredictable action!"

D. Donovan, *Midwest Book Review*

"...had me hooked from start to finish. I must say I have had a lack of sleep as I couldn't put it down, and when I did, I still thought about it."

Miriam Davison, author of *Sand, Sea and Meadow Muffins*

"This book was fantastic! I was riveted, wanting to know what was going to happen to Bernie. The story has humor, a well thought out world of gods and their creations, and subplots interwoven in a way that makes this book difficult to put down. ... a fascinating tale of good vs. evil and of a young hero on a journey of self-discovery."

S. M. Lowry, *The Fringes of Reality*

"Wow... I gobbled it up! Unusual and intriguing plot...a mind-bending journey...and a great start for a series."

Ardis Schaaf

"This book totally took me by surprise! The author does a great job of building empathy for his main character. It definitely kept me turning pages to find out what poor Bernie would have to go through next. There are some twists and turns that keep you guessing, and it ends wonderfully, leaving the door open for many possibilities. This story will undoubtedly capture your heart, as well as make you wonder if WE have our own Bernie."

Felicia Madura, author of *Crimson Cloak, Born of Blood*

"This book was just wonderful! The story was captivating, and the characters were interesting and fun. I absolutely loved the storyline, and the story was quite original. I loved the story, and thought it was brilliant. It's a wonderful new twist on how worlds and such are created. The ending ... was just what I wanted it to be."

Hayley Guertin, *Hayley's Reviews*

"Everybody loves an underdog story, and I'm no different...but this is the first time I've read one where the underdog was a god. Mr. LeBel's creative genius shines throughout the entire book, and I can only hope that this is the first in a series of Universe Builder novels. I would love to see this made into a movie..."

Chris Snead

“...a fascinating world populated by weird, crazy characters that will tickle your funny bone and, at times, tug at your heartstrings.”

Linda Watkins, author of *Mateguas Island*

“I expected to enjoy it, after all, every review I read was very positive, but I did not expect to be drawn in so quickly. The story had me captivated until the end and an overwhelming desire to see Bernie victorious kept me hooked.”

Lynne Fellows, Just 4 My Books

“Hands-down the best indie novel I have ever read. Best book, period, that I have read in at least a year. The writing is so descriptive you forget where you are. I could picture every moment, every scene, every person, as vividly as if I were watching a movie. Comparable to some of C.S. Lewis’ work.”

Rachael Snead, author of *Long Tail, Short Tail*

“There are times when the technical jargon flows so smoothly that you would swear Mr. LeBel was an Astrophysicist. Then at times he wraps the story like a mixture of Pratchett (they wear the same kind of hats) and Hans Christian Andersen. A story that can be enjoyed by any age. The possibilities for future adventures are limitless.”

H. William Ruback, author of *the SHORT of it...*

“LeBel’s humorous fantasy ... will be a classic. ... created a character who will wend his way into readers hearts... LeBel’s humorous insight into human nature made me laugh out loud at times and often brought a smile to my face. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to Bernie at the end.”

Darlene Blasing, author of *Bargain Paradise*

“...thanks to LeBel, I’ve gained both comic and cosmic insight into what it might be like to have godlike powers. ...I’m not so sure I’ll wish for such powers again.”

J. Scott Payne, author of *A Corporal No More*

The Universe Builders

Bernie and the Putty

Steve LeBel



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Dedication

To the Bernie in all of us.

Prologue

Have you ever wondered about the universe? How it came to be? The purpose of it all?

Well, the answers may surprise you.

Actually, there are a lot of universes out there. They come in every size and shape and flavor you can imagine. And the answers to your questions are very different, depending on which universe you're in.

Some universes are amazing. They're full of beautiful planets, intelligent races, technological marvels, and other wonders. But some of them are not so amazing. Each universe is created by a god, of course, as is required for such things. One of the inconvenient truths is: not all gods are created equal. Oh, they have the best teachers and the best educations possible, and, over the ages, the gods have developed a good work ethic and a strong desire to do the best they can. But gods are pretty much like everyone else. They have their own share of overachievers and underachievers, motivated and unmotivated, and talented and not so talented, which explains why some of the universes out there are not really up to professional standards.

This is a story about those gods. They live in The Town, on a planet they call The World. Their primary occupation is building universes, which they call The Business. You needn't be much concerned about their lack of creativity in naming things. They all live in the same town on the same planet. And there isn't anyone else in the god business, so they don't need a lot of fancy names to differentiate these things.

No one remembers how The Business began. They've been building universes as far back as anyone can recall. They will always be doing it. It's one of those things gods do. It isn't like they can just quit The Business and do something else. Their whole economy depends on the universes they create. And since it is the only thing they will ever do, they make it fun by seeing how well they can do it.

The only real competition on The World is the Annual Universe Awards. This is when a special committee looks over the new universes to see if anyone has come up with something worthy of an award. After so many millennia, there is an award for every category you can imagine. The trick is to be better than the god who won that category last time. So if you are going for the *Most Beautiful Planet*, with forty-seven winners before you, each one more beautiful than the last, you have to be exceptional to become number forty-eight. But the competition is everyone's favorite event, and the gods work hard to outdo each other. It's the best and fastest way to gain recognition for your work.

Not every god is cut out to be a builder, of course. Some gods are better at other things, which is good, because The Town needs cooks, librarians, plumbers and all manner of other professions as well. In school, everyone has a chance to become a builder, but as the classes keep getting harder and more challenging, there are more reasons to change your major to something else.

To help you understand The World, we'll take a look at an ordinary boy. He isn't the smartest, although he isn't dumb. He certainly didn't distinguish himself in school, unless you count his reputation for being picked on more than most kids. He had few friends, perhaps because he came from a broken home. His mom worked hard to raise him the best she could, but after the divorce, she struggled to make ends meet. Our boy's only claim to fame is his dad, who won three universe awards and became a major celebrity all over The World.

We take you to our young god at a special time in his life. He has just finished school and is about to start his first job.

An exciting time to be sure...

The Time of Waiting

The young god closed the door to his home, glancing from force of habit at the bridge path that led to The Town. Bernie had not taken that path for several days, nor would he today. Instead, he circled around to the back of the small home he shared with his mother. There he would take a less used path into the woods.

“Where shall we go today?” he asked, although he appeared to be alone. “I know. Let’s go to the lookout point. We haven’t been there for a while.” His invisible friend did not reply, although a small group of twigs quickly assembled on the path behind the boy and began merrily hopping along in single file after him.

Bernie would never have called his companion a friend, any more than he would have called his finger a friend. But he had developed a habit of talking to him as if he understood—and perhaps in some ways he did. He was usually better behaved when Bernie talked to him. If left to his own devices, well, then anything might happen...

During his younger years, he had often thought of his companion as an evil force, something to be fought or battled into submission. For a long time he felt shame, as if it was a dark curse or terrible flaw. He tried to hide it—still did, really—but that usually just made things worse. Other gods had clouds, of course, but not nearly as strong. Nor as chaotic.

‘It’s not your fault,’ they told him. ‘When each child is born, Order and Chaos fight for dominance. For most children, it’s a close battle, and the child ends up with only a slight inclination toward one side or the other. This imbalance is what we call the cloud, and, for most people, their cloud is rarely heard from. But for people like you, Bernie, your cloud is very strong. When Order and Chaos were supposed to fight for you, Order never showed up, and Chaos won by default,’ they said. ‘That’s why your cloud is so strong.’

‘You can’t win by fighting your cloud. You have to make friends with it. Try to understand what it wants. Learn to live with it,’ they counseled. ‘After all, it’s part of you.’ Bernie tried. Really, he did. But it was hard to be friends with something inherently chaotic. It was unpredictable, disorderly, unreliable, and often just plain stubborn.

As the young god entered the woods, the sky seemed to darken. Here in the woods, the gods took no responsibility for encouraging or discouraging the trees from doing whatever they wanted, although the Town Council had talked about it often enough. One tree in particular—the Old One—was the subject of perennial discussions. The tree’s big offense was having attained a height so great that some complained it blocked the sun in much of the Northeast Quadrant. An exaggeration, perhaps, but that didn’t explain why no one ever volunteered to take it down. It didn’t explain their fear.

Bernie’s path took him to the trunk of the great tree. “Hello, Old One.” Even from the far side of town, the great tree could be seen towering above their world. Bernie stroked his hands against the soft warm bark as if greeting a friend. The tree had been created by a god, of course, but that was so long ago no one remembered who had done it or why. Even its placement in the woods was a mystery. Perhaps it had been an accidental passenger, riding in the entrails of a more exotic creation, excreted on fertile ground, and left to grow. Bernie had been delighted the first time he touched it and discovered it was warm-blooded.

Bernie put his ear against the great tree and listened to the slow quiet rumble of its great heart as it pushed the sap through its veins. “I think you will outlast us all,” he said as he stroked the soft bark.

Bernie felt a small tap on his leg. Expecting a cloud-prank, he found instead a green vine rearing up like a snake in front of him. Although it looked like a plant, he knew it was not.

“Ah,” he said as understanding dawned, “are you sure you want to go up there?” The vine creature tapped higher on his leg. “Okay, okay,” he said, “I’ll help.”

Bernie gently grasped the slither, lifting it upward, its head snaking higher as it reached for a low branch. Bernie laughed as the slither wrapped itself around his arms and neck in its struggle to ascend. Finally, its head reached the branch where it twisted around twice before pulling the rest of its long body up the great tree. Slithers were always looking for tall trees where they could reach the sunlight. Once there, the tiny leaf-like scales that covered their bodies would fan outward, capturing the sun’s precious energy. If they found the

right tree, they would spend their entire lives there.

Bernie smiled. "You've found the ultimate home here, little buddy."

Slithers were one of the refugee species. When a god brought one of their creations to town, they made sure the species was harmless. Sometimes a new species didn't play well with others, but that was uncommon. The most common offense of a refugee species was over-population. If enough people complained, then the Town Council would take action and impose a ban. Usually the banned species was rounded up and thrown into an empty void. Sometimes a handful of them escaped the roundup and found safety in the woods.

In the woods, they were safe from the gods... And they were generally safe from any other created beings that had found their way to the woods. But the indigenous life forms that crawled up the side of the plateau from time to time, well, that was a different story. Perhaps it was a good thing the slithers spent their lives in the treetops.

Bernie felt a guilty pleasure for his love of the woods. He didn't know anyone else who felt the same. Most gods shunned the woods because of the danger. But this was Bernie's backyard and much of his youth had been spent here. In school, he seldom talked about the woods, having learned it was best not to give more reasons than people already had to see him as different. Most already thought him strange.

Too far away for the young god to hear, there was a quiet rustling. Even if he heard the creatures that made the sound, he would not have seen them. The woods were filled with brushes, shrubs, and tall ferns that obscured the view. And hiding places were plentiful. From many dark and hidden places, tiny eyes watched the young god's every move. It was not the first time the watchers had followed the boy. They had little fear of discovery as they trailed him deeper into the wood.

When the path separated, Bernie took the right fork, knowing it led to the stream. This was one of four streams that began at the artesian well in the center of town. Each stream had been designed to circle the town once before finally reaching the rim of the great plateau and cascading over The Edge. Bernie discovered a crossing place years ago; a tree had fallen across the stream, and this had become his bridge. The other gods would have laughed at him for calling it a bridge, but it accomplished the same purpose: reaching the other side of the stream.

As he climbed on top of the fallen tree, he said, "Okay now, let's be careful. We don't want to get wet." Once, his invisible cloud had not understood the precarious nature of balancing high above the rushing waters and had decided to lighten the mood by tickling Bernie. That had resulted in wet clothes, angry words, and a long walk home. Since then, no chaotic episodes had intruded on Bernie's river crossing attempts. But, each time, he made a point of reminding his cloud to be careful.

He'd learned a lot about his cloud over the years. It was easily agitated. Strong emotions of any kind guaranteed chaotic consequences, so Bernie learned to keep his feelings hidden. It was the best way to avoid the unpredictable. Out of habit, Bernie sent gentle, calming thoughts as he balanced on the log leading to the other side of the stream. The cloud rewarded him by confining its attention to the creation of ripple patterns in the water, which were quickly carried away by the current. Neither Bernie nor his cloud noticed the tiny watchers as they crossed the bridge behind him moments later.

Strolling down the path leading to the lookout point, Bernie heard the sound of water colliding with the rocky slope as it reached the North Fall. Gentle breezes whispered in high branches. On rare days when the wind blew strong, the whistling rocks added their sound to the falling water. Bernie knew few people had ever heard their music. Patches of blue sky were infrequent in the shady woods. Near Bernie's feet, where no breeze blew, leaves and twigs twirled in a windless dance as the young god passed by.

Strange creatures called out from hidden places. Many, he had never seen up close. Some, glimpsed out of the corner of his eye, vanished when he turned to look. Others, he had never seen at all. *If I had my powers here*, he thought, *I would love to know what they look like.*

"We are almost at the lookout," he said as the shaded woods began yielding to the openness beyond The Edge.

The prominence Bernie called 'lookout point' was a flat-topped boulder that rose above and extended beyond the rocky border that made up The Edge. There was little vegetation that chose to live on the bare rock, although a handful of refugees, and perhaps some indigenous creatures, scrambled from their warm places in the sun when they heard the young god approaching. Bernie climbed the short distance to the

top. Although trees blocked any view of The Town, he had a magnificent view of the wilderness that began at the steep slope that led down the side of the plateau. Other places along The Edge were less steep, and, in many places, it was possible to walk down the slope to the unknown country, although, of course, no one ever did.

Bernie had an outstanding view. He could see all the way to the horizon. The wilderness below was thicker and more overgrown than the woods. The colors of the indigenous life below seemed drabber and less interesting than the life created by the gods. But, that was mere speculation, since no gods had ever explored the unknown territory. In the distance, Bernie could see lakes and large ponds, and always, there was the mysterious blue mountain barely visible against the horizon. He had spent many hours on this very rock, wondering about that mountain.

"Someday, we're going exploring," he said. Bernie smiled as he felt invisible hands press on his chest, holding him back. "Don't worry. Not anytime soon." Here, in the woods, he was at ease with his cloud. This was a safe place, and the cloud did little to embarrass him here.

Had there ever been a time before when Bernie felt so relaxed or so content? The young god smiled as he thought of everything he had accomplished. Graduating as a builder was the highest achievement possible. And he was a good builder, too. Not as good as his dad, maybe, but then, who was?

"Did you think we would make it? There were lots of times when I wasn't so sure." He suppressed the temptation to point out that most of those times were directly attributable to the cloud. "They threw everything they could at us. We can build suns, planets, moons, and everything in between. And we're not half-bad with life forms, either. We passed it all. We are builders!

"Mom is so proud of us," he said, savoring the feeling. Then, unbidden, his thoughts turned to his father. "I wonder if Dad even knows I've graduated. Do you think he would be proud of me?"

There was no answer. There was never any answer.

Bernie sighed.

His gloomy thoughts turned into a chuckle when he felt something patting him on the head. "Yes, I know. We did great. All we can do now is wait for the interview. Suzie said it can take a few days because they look at your file and talk to your teachers before they call you in."

After working so hard for so long, it was a true pleasure just to relax. No classes, no homework, no extra-credit assignments, no part time jobs. It was the closest Bernie had ever had to a vacation. As the shadows lengthened and the day drew to a close, Bernie felt at peace.

* * *

As the young god made his way back through the woods, the tiny eyes watched him. Stealthy and careful, nothing betrayed their presence as they followed the boy all the way back to his home.

Personnel Department

It was a busy month for Ezra. This was the time of year when they hired the young gods who graduated with degrees in universe building. He'd worked his way through the list of applicants, and still had five more students to interview.

Suzie stepped into his office, pot in hand. "More coffee?"

"Yes, thanks."

"I filed all the evaluation forms that came in." She poured fresh coffee into his cup. "I flagged the ones I thought you would want to review. I also made a list of the supervisors who are late with their evaluations this month so we can follow up."

"Thanks, Suzie. You're doing a great job."

Ezra smiled when he saw how his compliment affected Suzie's godly shimmer. The outer edge of her aura broke out in tiny gold sparkles. This time of year, he was so busy he always fell behind. She was making him look good.

"Is there anything else I can do?"

"I'm all set for now. Thanks."

Ezra picked up the remaining stack of applications. As the Director of Personnel for The Business, he decided whom to hire for the most coveted job in The World. The School forwarded records and transcripts for the new builders from its most recent graduating class. So far, he'd hired everyone he'd interviewed, as he did almost every year.

Ezra took his responsibility seriously. He knew there were times when an applicant might look good on paper, but he could tell things wouldn't work out. Usually, the rejects were found among the students last to apply, which was the group he was looking at now.

He picked up the next file and paged through years of transcripts, teacher comments, and parent-teacher conference notes. Ezra enjoyed looking at the files. Each file was a complete record of the candidate's school experience from elementary school all the way through graduation. This young god, Bernie, looked about average. As usual, Ezra skipped the first half of the file—he wasn't concerned with the early years. Bernie had mostly B's with a few C's, which wasn't bad. He flunked Advanced Quantum Mechanics 307, but repeated it and got a solid B. His performance in his lab classes had been poor, and his teachers suggested a need for better planning and preparation. His performance improved as he got older. There was one class where he had a D+, and that was Creation Ethics 200. His teacher said Bernie understood the material well enough, but he refused to accept it. *Hmm*, thought Ezra, *problems with authority?* The thick file showed just one extracurricular activity, the Off World Technology (OWT) group, a bunch of geeky kids who swapped technology from other worlds. The file included Bernie's placement in co-op jobs over the years, including summer jobs. His supervisors gave him good reports. That was a plus. *It shows the kid is willing to work.*

Ezra made a list of people to talk with and questions to ask. To make sure he understood Bernie's early weaknesses, he started with Caleb, one of the boy's elementary school creation lab instructors. He added Gabriel, the creation ethics instructor who had written the long note about Bernie's ethics problems. He paged through the file looking for the name of Bernie's last co-op supervisor. When he found it, he added Peter to his list. He smiled as he noticed Beatrice's name on several classes. He always enjoyed an excuse to talk to her, so he added her name to the list. Something was missing.

Oh, I think this is the kid Suzie told me about. I should talk with her too.

Caleb's Story

With his list in hand, Ezraah walked across Central Plaza to The School. He'd start with Caleb, the elementary lab instructor, although he wondered if the man would remember Bernie.

"Of course I remember him." Caleb broke into laughter. "Bernie gave me the best laugh I've had in centuries. Not just me, either. He made quite a reputation for himself."

"What happened?" Ezraah found himself smiling at Caleb's infectious laughter.

"I gave the kids a basic sun-planet-moon project—nothing tricky at all," Caleb explained. "The lab manual called for a yellow sun, a rock planet with atmosphere and hydrosphere, and a moon. Just the basics, you know."

"No kits?"

"No, they had to make everything from scratch. But Bernie didn't read the manual before he came to class. That was his first mistake," Caleb said. "By the way, have you met Wanda?"

"Yes. I certainly have." Ezraah recalled the young goddess with a perfect straight-A record and glowing reports from her teachers. "She was the first person I hired this year. A very impressive young lady."

"That's true, although her skills didn't make her popular with the other kids. They usually kept one eye on what she was doing as they worked on their own stuff. Bernie was no exception.

"Well, Bernie jumped right in and made a red sun. It was supposed to be yellow, but since he hadn't read the manual, he missed that. When he noticed everyone else making yellow suns, he started reading the manual. By the time he finished, half the class was over. That's when he went into overdrive.

"I think he decided to keep it red because he didn't have time to do it over. To make up for points he would lose on sun color, he figured he would go for a really big planet—twice what the specs called for. He got the planet revolving around the sun, and he made an ocean covering half the surface. His planet started out okay.

"But there was a problem. As soon as the oceans rotated to the dark side of the planet, they froze. And when the oceans rotated back to the light side, it took most of the day before they thawed out." Caleb was grinning.

"I assume that was because of the cooler red sun."

"Exactly. Bernie tried to fix it by spinning the planet faster so the ocean wouldn't have time to freeze on the night side. Unfortunately, Bernie hadn't thought about the centrifugal forces involved. The faster spin caused the oceans to slide toward the equator with such force, it threw a stream of water vapor into the atmosphere, where it escaped from the planet's gravitational field."

Ezraah laughed. He visualized the planet zipping along through space, spinning like a drunken top, while dragging a long vapor tail behind it.

"Bernie was worried. He feared the escaping water vapor would cause his planet to be reclassified as a comet since it now had a tail, so he slowed the rotation down until the water was no longer achieving escape velocity. Fortunately for Bernie, there was still water left on the planet.

"He still needed a way to keep the dark side of the planet warm so it wouldn't freeze. Do you know what he asked me?" Caleb's eyes twinkled.

"Not a clue."

"He wanted to know if it was okay to have two suns. He had the bright idea to put his planet

between two suns and have the planet spin in place. That would keep both sides of the planet warm, solving his frozen ocean problem. I reminded him his planet had to revolve around the sun, so that wouldn't work. He was very disappointed.

"Finally, he moved his planet closer to the sun, which solved the problem. That was when he looked over to see what Wanda was doing. She had finished her project and decided to add two extra moons just to show off.

"Bernie decided to try the same thing. Maybe he wanted to make up for the points he would lose for the red sun or maybe he was trying to compete with Wanda. Or maybe he never finished reading the manual and really thought he was supposed to have three moons. Who knows?

"Bernie was running out of time, but he rushed ahead anyway. He decided two of his moons would circle the third moon instead of the planet. He made a large moon and got it into a good orbit. Then he put the two smaller moons in orbit around the big moon. And, in a clear play for extra credit, he made them circle the moon in a vertical orbit instead of the traditional horizontal orbit. Now, that would have given him a passing grade, except for one problem. He needed to verify orbital stability." Caleb struggled to keep a straight face.

"He pushed into the future to see how the orbits looked, but found the second moon had crashed into the first and pieces of both had smashed into the planet, definitely a failing grade. He pulled back to the present time and tried a do-over by adjusting the orbits. But every time he did a future check, he found the planet in ruins."

"How far in the future do they have to verify a stable orbit?"

Caleb's eyes twinkled again as he said, "We usually tell the kids their solar system has to be stable long enough to give any advanced life forms a fighting chance to evolve, invent space travel, and escape to a safer planet."

Ezrah laughed, and Caleb laughed with him.

"It finally dawned on Bernie his fancy moons were a problem. That is when he decided any passing grade was more important than outdoing Wanda. So he grabbed all three moons, mashed them together into one large moon, and put it into orbit. He did a future check, and the orbit was stable.

"Relief was all over his face until he noticed a two-thousand foot tidal wave racing around the equator." Caleb could barely tell the story because he was laughing so hard.

"I assume that was because the moon was so big and heavy."

"Yep. Now, most of us would know to make the moon smaller or lighter or move it farther away from the planet so the gravitational forces wouldn't be so strong. Bernie was so frazzled he didn't think it through.

"Instead, he squished the planet. He thought if he squished it, the oceans would be forced away from the equator and closer to the poles. All he accomplished, of course, was to subject his oceans to even greater centrifugal forces, which increased the depth of the oceans and the height of the tidal wave." Tears of laughter rolled down Caleb's cheeks.

"The saddest part came next. I saw Bernie's face the moment he figured out what to do. He was going to move his moon farther away, which would have solved the problem. But, that's when I had to tell everyone their time was up. Poor Bernie. So close and yet so far."

"That's funny. I wish I'd seen it."

"You can," exclaimed Caleb. "His universe is one of few I've saved over the years." He brought Ezrah to a viewing window hanging on the wall.

As Ezrah gazed into the window, he saw a large red sun; around that sun rotated a sad little planet.

The planet, instead of being round, looked squished, just as Caleb had described. Its oceans were concentrated around the equator where two massive tidal waves, one on each side of the planet, were dragged around the world by a gigantic moon. It looked like a fat little world trying to swing a Hula-hoop ocean around its middle.

Ezrah saw every detail of Caleb's story written on the planet. Even the moon looked like a lump of clay with two smaller lumps squished into it. They both laughed some more.

"I must admit I feel badly about one thing, though," Caleb said as his laughter subsided.

"What's that?"

"I told the other teachers about Bernie's universe. We got such a kick out of it, we put it in the school's Alumni Newsletter. Unfortunately, it got back to the kids at school, and Bernie took a lot of abuse from his classmates over it. I heard kids making up expressions like 'Don't Bernie it.' or 'What a Bernard!' I didn't mean for that to happen."

"Just one more question for you, Caleb. Would you recommend Bernie for a builder job with The Business?"

"Sure, I'd probably hire him. I'd keep an eye on a couple of things, though."

"What?"

"First, make sure he reads the manual before he tries to do anything."

"Okay. What's the second thing?"

"Don't let him sit next to Wanda."

The Waiting Continues

The young god closed the door to his home and turned toward the woods. The tiny eyes noticed him right away. For years, they had watched him leave in the morning and not come back until night. Three or four times a week, he found time to walk with them in the woods. Well, not really... He didn't know they were there, but they walked with him nonetheless.

Bowin, whose job was to watch for the young god, alerted the others the boy had been seen heading into the woods. The watchers came together, careful to make no noise. They liked the boy. They'd seen many gods in town before they became refugees and fled to the woods. This one was gentle, and they knew he would not hurt them. Even so, they never let him know they were there.

Two weeks earlier, something had changed. The boy no longer left home in the mornings. And he was spending more time than ever in the woods. They liked seeing more of him, but they wondered what had happened. For the first few days, he walked along the path and even hummed tunes. His shimmer had been strong, with flecks of gold and blue. He seemed very happy. Bowin had to caution the other watchers not to be caught up in their joy at seeing so much of the boy. There was still great danger in the woods, and they needed to be cautious.

Following the boy was always an adventure. Strange things happened near him, like branches breaking or things moving by themselves. Once, when Gingi was watching the boy, something pushed the branch she was lying on, and she had to hold tight or she would have fallen. It was as if an invisible force surrounded the young god. And that wasn't all. Often things from the boy's pockets ended up on the ground. They had talked about this many times. They were sure the boy did not want this. Bowin always assigned two members of their troupe to recover lost items and return them to the boy's home.

Bowin wished he understood the language of the gods. It was not easy. The gods communicated mostly with sounds, but the sounds were very complex. And there was a relationship between their sounds and the colors in the shimmers that surrounded them. The young ones, like their boy, often displayed many constantly changing colors, while the older gods showed fewer color changes. Interestingly, they seldom talked with other parts of their bodies. Lamona speculated the gods had been forced to learn complicated verbal sounds because they had no tails or even ears they could move to make their meaning clear. Bowin was not convinced. He thought the gods were so powerful, they simply had no need for soundless ways to talk. But, in the final analysis, no one really knew what the gods were thinking. And that was reason enough to keep your distance.

Today, and for the last three days, they saw none of the gold and blue colors in the shimmering light that surrounded the boy. The young god's head was down, seeming to stare at the path in front of him. Several times, he changed direction without warning, as if wrestling inner demons. And the odd things that happened close to him were now happening farther away. Once, he turned around so fast, he almost saw them, and they had to scramble for cover.

Still, they followed.

* * *

After a time, Bernie's thoughts slowly untangled and began to make sense. He'd come a long way, but it wasn't over. Everything depended on getting hired by The Business. He'd put in his application over a week ago.

"Why is it taking so long?" he asked as he walked along.

If his cloud heard him, it did not respond. But then, it never did. Clouds didn't talk. In fact, even listening was rare. They seemed to know what was going on, but it was more of an emotional understanding than an intellectual one. A cloud had access to your senses, but it didn't process things through a full brain. It used the primitive, instinctual part that housed your needs and your desires. And it never thought about consequences. If Bernie could have changed one thing about his cloud, he would have made it think about the consequences of its actions before it did something. But there was no cloud anywhere that did that. Bernie's strategy was simple: keep himself calm, which tended to keep his cloud calm. Usually. Sometimes. But not always...

Bernie had been to The Edge twice already today. He tried to relax in the moss-covered clearing near the stream, but his nervous energy wouldn't let him sit still. Doubts he didn't know he had emerged to trouble him. So he walked.

"My grades were good—I was in the top third of my class," he said, as if trying to convince someone else. How long did it take to speak with his teachers? Did they talk to all of them? There were some he hoped they didn't talk to at all.

"Beatrice would say good things. She was the best," he said, thinking immediately of his favorite teacher. "But what would the others say?" Most of them would only remember him as the kid who fought with Billy. No matter how many times he thought about the fight, the intense feelings never diminished. Going over the edge like that was the worst thing he'd ever done. *Ouch!*

Bernie felt the pull on his hair and quickly slapped it down before it could tie itself into a knot. He calmed his mind and turned away from thoughts of the fight, lest his cloud become even more upset.

As if on cue, he found himself at The Edge. Had some part of his sub-consciousness sent him here again? *What is it that keeps calling to me out there?* At this point on the rim, the land sloped gently downward. It would be a leisurely stroll down into the unknown territory. Did such thoughts make him insane? No. He was as sane as anyone else. It was just the pressure.

A tug on the cuff of his pants brought him back to reality. "Stop that," he said automatically. He wasn't surprised to see a snarl of unraveled threads dragging behind him. The threads, once part of his pants, had been used to capture small twigs, leaves, and even an unwary stone that had failed to move out of range. It was one of his cloud's favorite pranks. "We can't afford to buy more clothes right now. We already bought new clothes for my interview," he said, hoping he would have a chance to use them.

The threads twitched once and stopped.

"And don't even think about doing this to the new clothes. They have to be perfect for my interview."

The threads and their stranglehold on the collection of sticks and stones loosened in response to Bernie's words. Suddenly the captured sticks raced off in different directions, free at last from the threads that had held them tight. The stone rolled drunkenly down the path.

"That's not funny," said Bernie. "And please don't do it again."

After a time, Bernie resumed his walk. He found no answers. Everything was already in motion. There was no test he could retake, no class he could study for, no extra-credit assignments to do.

There was nothing he could do except wait.

* * *

And so, the watchers with the tiny eyes, they waited with him.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- **Genre:** humorous science fiction / fantasy for young adult and adult
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- **Author:** Steve LeBel
- **Description:** A young god graduates from God School and gets his dream job of building his first universe. Plagued by a school rival and aided by his friends, he struggles to create a world he can be proud of.
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