

Review: JAS660

THE SNICKETY SERIES

a book review of
A Series of Unfortunate Events
by Lemony Snicket
(HarperCollins)

This review first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 27, number 5 (2004). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Readers have only a finite amount of time to consume an almost infinite amount of books, and so must choose wisely. The set of children's books titled A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket is a commercial and critical success with more than 22 million copies in circulation. Eleven of 13 books in the series have been published, and most have appeared among the top 10 on the *New York Times* bestseller list for several weeks, the first two titles remaining for more than 150 weeks. A film version that covers the first three books is scheduled to open nationwide on December 17, starring Jim Carrey as the evil Count Olaf.

Lemony Snicket is the pen name that author Daniel Handler uses with his children's fiction series, and it is also the name of the narrator in the series. Snicket prefaces each book with a wry warning to stay away from the book, promising that it will have an unhappy ending. The narrator (Snicket) tells readers in *The Wide Window*, for example, "If you are interested in reading a story filled with thrillingly good times, I am sorry to inform you that you are most certainly reading the wrong book, because the Baudelaires experience very few good times over the course of their gloomy and miserable lives" (p. 2). The best thing about the series is its humor, which is sarcastic, satirical, sardonic, and intelligent. Its alliterative titles are: *The Bad Beginning*, *The Reptile Room*, *The Wide Window*, *The Miserable Mill*, *The Austere Academy*, *The Ersatz Elevator*, *The Vile Village*, *The Hostile Hospital*, *The Carnivorous Carnival*, *The Slippery Slope*, and *The Grim Grotto*. Snicket employs underused words throughout the books, as some of the titles exemplify, which he explains through entertaining asides.

The books revolve around three young siblings: Violet, Klaus, and baby Sunny Baudelaire who are orphaned when their parents die in a fire in their mansion. Their parents' will stipulates that the children will not receive their fortune until the eldest (Violet) comes of age, and until then they must live with a blood relative. The Baudelaire children band together to keep their fortune out of the hands of their evil uncle, Count Olaf, who tries desperately and repeatedly to murder them and steal their inheritance. The plot is formulaic and unhappy, yet throughout the books the Baudelaire siblings are portrayed as loving, loyal, and faithful, and they work together to stay alive.

Adult characters in the series are untrustworthy and useless and fall into one of two categories: villains or gullible tools of villains. A child who is rebellious or antagonistic toward adults probably should not read these books, as these characters may justify that attitude in his or her mind.

The series easily dismisses any kind of black-and-white or absolute ethics. In *The Reptile Room*, for example, Snicket explains: "When you were very small, perhaps someone read to you the insipid story — the word 'insipid' here means 'not worth reading to someone' — of the *Boy Who Cried Wolf*...Whoever read you the story probably told you that the moral was not to lie. This is an absurd moral, for you and I both know that sometimes not only is it good to lie, it is necessary to lie (141-42)." The story of The Boy

Who Cried Wolf, however, does not teach that there are no necessary exceptions to the rule not to lie; it merely illustrates how lying breeds disbelief. Exceptions to the rule, moreover, do not make it absurd.

Parental involvement — monitoring what children read, engaging them in conversation about it, and reading often with them — is essential to ensure that children learn in an age-appropriate manner. The publisher of the Snicket series recommends it for readers age 10 and older. It could be an entertaining read for some preteens, but for others it could be a troublingly scary confirmation of all that is wrong with this world. Wise parents will dissuade their children from reading this series and, instead, encourage them to read the tales by Charles Dickens, Hans Christian Andersen, or the Grimm brothers. Their literature portrays loss, sadness, betrayal, unfairness, and other “unfortunate events,” but does so with literary excellence, robust ethical values, complex characters, and edifying themes. The Snicket series may not be terrible, but many better-quality books are available to engage young readers. Choose wisely.

— reviewed by Mary E. Passantino