The Post and Courier
charleston.net

Books take dread out of science fair

BY FRAN HAWK

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2006 7:57 AM

Give me Rocky Mountain spotted fever or give me science projects. Since childhood, I've been tempted to choose the fever. The pernicious shadow of each science fair loomed directly over our house and caused weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. And that was just when we were choosing topics. The process went downhill from there.

As living proof that the world is improving, along comes Merrie Koester Southgate. She loves this science stuff. She makes science interesting, fun, exciting and relevant. Agnes Pflumm, the science teacher in Southgate's books, takes over where Miss Frizzle in the "Magic School Bus" series left off. Southgate's books are chapter books for students ages 8 and up. Her aim is to make students think, laugh and be inspired to make a difference.

In "No Place Like Periwinkle," Agnes Pflumm lets her father do the work on her seventh-grade science project. Another word for this is "cheating." Agnes' fear of science projects stays with her into adulthood. (I can relate to that.) Other themes in this book are the science/art connection and surviving a hurricane.

In "Agnes Pflumm and the Stone Creek Science Fair," Agnes is the new middle school science teacher. Although she starts the job fearing science projects, she and her students accomplish their goals and learn a lot about science and life along the way.

"Pond Scum and Agnes Pflumm" is about "Green Development" economics, wetland/ stream restoration, and conservation easements. Southgate weaves these themes into an exciting, funny, completely believable story that empowers children to be environmental heroes.

At the close of each book, there's a "Don't Just Sit There" section that challenges students to think through the deeper issues in each chapter. Sample thoughts: "Why might you dread doing a science fair

project? Be specific." "Invent something that might become a reality 400 years from now and sketch it out." (like Leonardo da Vinci)

The science action for students, parents and teachers continues at www.agnespflumm.com. Topics on the Web site include the "Science and Art" connection, "No Fear Science Projects," as well as a section on personal dilemmas such as fear of failure and time-management issues. There's also a sneak preview of "The Last Book" contest for which students may submit stories and illustrations.

Southgate is well-qualified to fill the science maven slot. For the past 17 years, she has been a science teacher, as well as a professional artist.

In her graduate work, she developed a program for teaching science through creative drama, poetry, story telling and visual arts. She believes that "the arts give students access to a level of understanding not possible through a solely textbook-driven curriculum."

Kids who read these books are at risk of going *Pflumm-crazy* over science.

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This article was printed via the web on 9/29/2006 9:34:50 AM . This article appeared in The Post and Courier and updated online at Charleston.net on Thursday, September 28, 2006.

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