## BONGO FISHING

## THACHER HURD

## LOUISIANA YOUNG READERS’ CHOICE NOMINEE 2014

**GRADE 3-5**

Submitted by Cathy Smith, Supervisor of Libraries, Caddo Parish Schools, Shreveport, LA.

Hurd, Thacher. *Bongo Fishing*. New York: Henry Holt and, 2011.

**SUMMARY**

Jason, an unassuming, normal middle schooler does what he usually does—walk home from school taking his usual route when something most unusual happens. A UFO, in the form or a 1960 Dodge Dart, whizzes above and crashes into a vacant lot. So begins Jason’s unusual friendship with Sam, a midget sized, friendly, grandfatherly, blue alien, well versed in American culture. Owner of Sam’s Intergalactic Garage, he's from the Pleiades star cluster and enjoys twenty first century life--wearing purple high tops, eating glazed doughnuts, and listening to Count Basie on the interstellar radio system. It seems Sam had taken the Dart out for a spin to test the new Turbo drive when it quit, dropping Sam into the California neighborhood. Soon, Jason meets Sam’s wife, Edna, a huge Elvis fan and the three of them take an outer-space trip full of awesome sights and folksy, humorous and heartwarming dialogue.

Their times together are filled with many humorous twists of Earth conventions, as when a phone recording tells Jason that "you must dial four hundred twenty-six ones" to contact another universe. On a later visit, Jason assists as Sam makes a huge mess in the kitchen concocting space fuel from chewing gum and Gatorade. Intriguing gadgets are depicted and amusing descriptions of alien technology add to the fun. Interspersed with the fun, however, are suspenseful moments when they notice a large black car lurking in the neighborhood. Jason discovers that a mysterious villain, Dr. Effrem Zimberger, is following him. Jason’s mom has questions about his unusual behavior and Jason’s zany but truthful explanations concern her. She sends him to a therapist—none other than the villainous Dr. Zimburger, who specializes in alien obsessed individuals hoping to extract information to revive the fortunes of Zimbovia, a former country in Eastern Europe. Sam and Edna prove to be helpful and endearing alien house guests that any self-respecting middle schooler with a wild imagination would welcome into his heart and closet!

**AWARDS**

At this point, **Bongo Fishing** has not won any awards.

**AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY**

Thacher Hurd is the son of famous author/ illustrator husband and wife team Edith Thacher and Clement Hurd. Their only child, he was born in Vermont, but has lived in California for most of his life. Theirs was a simple life, growing vegetables, doing their own home repairs, living on very little money. Thacher was very close to his parents and was encouraged to read, write, and paint. He grew up knowing many of the “greats” in children’s literature—Margaret Wise Brown and Don Freeman to name a few. During college, he discovered that he enjoyed reading and making pictures to go with his stories. He graduated from the California College of Arts and Crafts with a degree in painting.

He has written and illustrated more than 25 books for children, among them [Mystery on the Docks](http://thacherhurd.com/books/mystery-on-the-docks) and [Mama Don’t Allow](http://thacherhurd.com/books/mama-dont-allow), both of which were Reading Rainbow Feature Selections. [Mama Don’t Allow](http://thacherhurd.com/books/mama-dont-allow) also won the Boston Globe Horn Book Award. He also wrote and illustrated [Art Dog](http://thacherhurd.com/books/art-dog), [Moo Cow Kaboom](http://thacherhurd.com/books/moo-cow-kaboom), Sleepy Cadillac, and most recently [Bad Frogs](http://thacherhurd.com/books/bad-frogs). He collaborated with Elisa Kleven on [The Weaver](http://thacherhurd.com/books/the-weaver), which was published in 2010. He has also written and illustrated two board books, one of which, [Zoom City](http://thacherhurd.com/books/zoom-city), was a New York Times Best Illustrated Book of the Year. In 1983

Thacher and his wife Olivia founded Peaceable Kingdom Press, a publisher of cards and posters from children’s books. He lives in Berkeley, California and spends his summers in Vermont.

Marcus, Leonard S. *Pass It Down: Five Picture-Book Famlies make Their Mark.*  New York: Walker and Company, 2007.

**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**Social Studies**

Look at a map of California. Find Berkeley, where Jason lives. Skim Chapter 14 and make a list of the places Sam and Edna want to visit in the United States and find them on the map. Find the places in California that Sam and Edna passed on their way to Berkeley to find Jason.

**Art**

Use the online catalog or card catalog for your school or public library. See if there are additional books by Thacher Hurd. Note the similarities and differences in the art work. Until this time, what type of books has he primarily done? (if your school or library does not have other books by Mr. Hurd, go to his web site and look at the books listed there to answer these questions.)

Read the description of the scenery on the Bongo Fishing trip. (Chapter 10) Choose something from the description and illustrate it.

**Science**

Sam is from Pleaides. Go to the website below and find out more about the Pleiades. Why do you think Mr. Hurd chose this constellation as Sam and Edna’s home? <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/shimmerings/files/pleiades20120711.shtml>

Read about the constellations and star clusters. Choose one that you would like to visit and tell why.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. If you were Jason, what would you have done if you had seen a car land in a local vacant lot?
2. Jason’s cat was named Sputnik. Where did that name come from? Why do you think Mr. Hurd would use that as a name for a cat in this story?
3. Look at the author’s definition of bongo fishing, prior to page one. How does this set the stage for their fishing trip? Why do you think he chose this for the title of the book?
4. On page 94, Jason wonders, “What would happen if Sam and Edna had to stay on earth forever?” and a little later, he wonders, “How could they survive on Earth? Think of some possibilities if the couple was, indeed, stranded on Earth. What kind of job could they possibly get?
5. List some of the characteristics of Sam and Edna that make them seem like grandparents.
6. On page 128, Jason wonders if he should tell Dr. Zimburger the truth about whether or not he had seen aliens. Jason decides to “stick to what happened and trust that it would come out right in the end.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not? Can you think of a time when you chose **not** to tell the truth and “backed yourself into a corner” in doing so?”
7. After finishing the book, do you think ***Bongo Fishing*** is a good title for the book? Why or why not? Think of another possible, better title for the book.

**POSSIBLE RESEARCH ACTIVITIES, EXTENSIONS**

1. Mr. Hurd has quite a heritage in children’s literature. Read about his childhood in his bio and blog on his website. What specific things does he mention that no doubt had an influence on his career in children’s literature?
2. Do some research on vintage cars. If you could pick one of these to travel through the galaxy in, what would it be and why?
3. Edna was a huge fan of Elvis Presley. Do some research on him and list five of his most famous songs. What was controversial about him? Why do you think Edna was so fascinated with him? List a few fascinating facts about Elvis.
4. Sam also mentions Count Baise. Do some research on this famous figure in the history of music. Compare him and his kind of music with Elvis and his music.
5. Several of his books have been featured on Reading Rainbow. If you can find one of these, show it to the students for some additional fun. (If you have access to Discovery Education, videos of ***Mystery on the Docks*** and ***Mama Don’t*** Allow are available here.)