



## Youth Reads: TJ and the Time Stumblers (Bill Myers)

Jay Sappington | First Published: September 9, 2011

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Thelma Jean Finkelstein may *look* like a typical 13-year-old girl having trouble opening her school locker, but one day she will be President of the United States and will “eliminate world hunger, wipe out major diseases, end poverty, and . . . bring back the hula-hoop.”

TJ may *look* like a typical teen helping take care of her little sister, but actually, she’s valiantly striving to keep Dorie from finding out about Herby and Tuna, the two inept and invisible (but not inaudible) “time-stumbling” boys who have just arrived to study TJ for their 23rd-century school project.

Sound zany? You have no idea!

The ever-inventive Bill Myers, creator of *McGee and Me*, the Wally McDoogie *My Life as a . . .* series, and nearly two dozen other titles, has concocted a new recipe for non-stop action and madcap humor.

Whether it’s Herby and Tuna’s constantly malfunctioning gizmos from the future; teen TV-star Hesper Breakahart’s egotistical posturing; TJ’s hopeless faltering whenever she encounters Hesper’s handsome, nice-guy boyfriend, Chad Steel; or Myer’s breezily hysterical narration, the Time Stumblers stories are laugh-out-loud mayhem.

**The setup:** After losing their mother to cancer, sisters TJ, Violet, and Dorie have just moved from Missouri to California with their father. There, the awkward, self-conscious TJ finds herself thrust into the snobbish affluence of Malibu Junior High society.

**The complication:** Herby and Tuna, invisible to all except TJ, have just arrived on the scene.

**The point:** Knowing her future as they do, Herby and Tuna show TJ where she lacks the qualities necessary to become the respected world leader they’ve learned about in their history classes.

In the first book, *New Kid Catastrophes*, Tuna confronts TJ about avoiding geeky, unpopular AV

expert Naomi Simpletwerp and techno-nerd Doug Claudlooper.

“. . . According to our history holographs, one of your greatest traits will be your ability to look past the superficial and see what a person is really like on the inside.”

“But right now, you’re, like, totally ignoring the little dudes and dudettes, while going gam-gam over the Chad Steels of the world.”

In *Aaaargh!!!*, the second book, Herby and Tuna use the *here’s-what-the-future-could-look-like* holograph-projection feature on their 23rd-century Swiss Army Knife to help TJ grasp the truth that sin (cheating, in this case) has potentially disastrous, long-term effects.

Though the two confront TJ directly, their rebukes don’t seem heavy-handed, coming as they do in the form of friends helping friends, and wrapped in a hilarious bedlam only the displaced duo (and Meyers) could dish up.

Obviously, a hearty suspension of disbelief is required to enjoy TJ and her comical companions. Though few readers will begrudge the suspension, several plot developments run counter to the story’s own internal fictional and spiritual framework. One minor instance occurs in a key scene near the end of Book 1, when a robotic kitty inexplicably acts (or, rather, reacts) without operator Doug Claudlooper’s involvement. A less trivial example takes place early in Book 2 when our ostensible heroes, Herby and Tuna, actually *instigate* TJ’s first cheating episode.

Even more significant, however, is Tuna’s response to TJ after he shows her the problem-ridden future she faces if she *continues* cheating.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, right? . . .

“Right?” she repeated. “This is just one possibility. Right? Right?” . . .

“If you decide to cheat for Hesper, this is your only future.”

Though this works on a dramatic level—it convinces TJ to change her mind about cheating—the faulty implication is that making a bad choice now prevents God’s grace from ever again being sufficient to enable us to choose rightly. (Also, there’s no indication why this particular decision to cheat would be eternally decisive, while the previous one Tuna and Herby inspired was not).

Presumably, Myers wants to vividly illustrate the fact that sin can have truly horrible, unintended results that cannot be reversed—an important reality for any Christian to understand. But an inability to choose more wisely in the future is not one of those results! As the Apostle Paul teaches, “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” (1 Cor. 10: 13b) Parents will want to help their children recognize Tuna’s misunderstanding.

Girls may find the Time Stumblers series as appealing for its sympathetic female heroine and other key female characters as boys will for its prudence-challenged heroes, frenzied antics, and goofball humor. Both genders will certainly identify with the temptations and daily angst of teen life, not least the insecurities of navigating guy-gal relationships. Both, one suspects, will join this reviewer in eagerly awaiting forthcoming volumes in this series, chronicling the further

escapades of TJ and the Time Stumblers.

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