

## Village School Children's Book of the Month

Reviewed by George Bennett 5th-6th Teacher

### *Greetings from Witness Protection* by Jake Burt

*Greetings from Witness Protection* is a debut novel from 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher Jake Burt, and it's astonishingly good. As a read-aloud it completely gripped the Village School 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade class, with its combination of a highly original plot, well-drawn characters and a quirky and highly sympathetic heroine, who has unusual talents.

Nicki Demere has just turned thirteen when we meet her, and she is an engaging and humorous narrator. Her mother abandoned her as a baby, her father is in jail and, until she was eight, Nicki was raised by her grandmother. Grammy trained Nicki to be an accomplished pickpocket, which we see her demonstrate in a very funny incident early in the book. With the death of her Grammy, Nicki has spent five years with a succession of failed foster families, but is recruited from the childcare system by the U.S. Marshal's Service, to help them with a witness protection set-up.

Nicki is asked to erase her previous identity, and to become an additional member of a family of three, to make them more difficult to trace. The mother has given evidence against her major-league crime family, the Cercatores, and now has to go into secret witness protection with her husband and son, and her new daughter, Nicki.

The whole family assumes new names, and Nicki becomes Charlotte Trevor, with a younger brother Jackson, who is consumed by resentment against her, and anger towards his mother for upending his life. Author Jake Burt is very realistic in the way he shows the family learning a completely new identity and background, even including doctored family photos showing Nicki/Charlotte as a baby in the arms of her new mother. After a training period, the Trevors move to North Carolina, and among other humorous touches throughout the book is the children's adaptation to small-town southern life after living in New York City.

Charlotte and Jackson are enrolled in a new middle school, but in order to remain hidden, they are instructed by the Marshal's Service to do nothing - either good or bad - that would make them stand out. Charlotte has to adjust all her school work down from her former straight A's to maintain a strict and unremarkable B+ average. She is told to enroll in a sports club, but not to do well in it. At the same time, she has to learn to blend in with her new family, and to watch out for any threats from the Cercatore family, which is intent on retribution.

Charlotte maneuvers her way through the new school, and at times meets the sorts of new-kid problems that come up in a number of school-based children's books. This story is different, however, not least because of the way Charlotte sometimes has to resort to her talent for picking pockets to help her maintain her family's low profile and, on one occasion, to help defeat a plot to damage one of her new friend's chances on the school council election.

Meanwhile, the reader is given recurring hints throughout the book that the Cercatore family is closing in, helped by some errors on the part of Jackson, who uses his cellphone to vent his anger at his new life. This growing sense of menace is interwoven with the humor of Charlotte's situation at school, and the emotionally satisfying way that she bonds with her new parents, particularly her adopted mother, now living under the assumed name of Harriet.

As the book reaches its climax, we discover the ingenuity with which Harriet's brother - her family's main hit-man - has plotted his revenge, threatening not only Harriet herself but her

husband, son Jackson and her new daughter Charlotte. The already fast-paced plot picks up speed and careers towards a surprising but highly satisfying twist at the end.

*Greetings from Witness Protection* will appeal to readers from eleven years upwards, and to children and adults alike. One of the pleasures of reviewing it was to re-read the book for the fourth time in six months. It remained as exciting as ever.