“A double helping of fun and mischief!”
—Jeff Kinney, author of The Diary of a Wimpy Kid series

The Terrible Two

Jory John

Mac Barnett

Illustrated by Kevin Cornell
# Table of Contents

Discussion Questions 3

Mac Barnett & Jory John Talk with Roger 5

Good Books Are Like Good Pranks:

Chatting with the Terribly Funny Authors of “The Terrible Two” 10
Discussion Questions

1. The story begins with Mile’s first day in a new school. If you had a chance to go to a new school, what would you do differently? Who would you want to be this time around?

2. Miles and Niles attend a "Letters and Science Academy". The book never says how old they are supposed to be. How old did you think they were as you were reading the book? Why did you think that? Give examples of clues from the story that suggested how old they were to you. Did you think they were your own age—or older?

3. Who did you think was the better prankster—Miles or Niles. Give examples from the story that support your opinion.

4. Principal Barkin is convinced that Miles is the one responsible for all the pranks around school even though he isn’t. What did Niles do that made it so that he was above suspicion? Give examples. Has anyone ever tricked you into believing something that wasn’t true? What did they do to make you believe them?

5. Did you like the facts about cows? Why or why not? Which cow fact was your favorite? Did the facts make cows—usually a boring animal—seem more interesting to you? If so, why do you think that is?

6. Did reading this book make you think about pranks that you could play on people you know? Did you actually follow through and play a prank on someone after reading this book? Do you think there are some kids out there who would read this book and play a prank afterward? Can books influence people to do things they might never have thought about doing before? Give examples of both a good and bad way that books can influence people to change their behavior.

7. Have you ever had a prank played on you? How did it make you feel? Have you ever played a prank on someone else? How did it make you feel? Why do you think these two situations feel so much different?

8. Miles wants the school to know that he was the one who pulled the birthday party prank on them. He wants people to think he is clever and cool. Niles tells him that revealing his identity would be a big mistake—the kids would hate him. If Miles had revealed he was the one that had set up the birthday prank, how do you think the kids in his class would have reacted? Would they have thought he was clever and cool or would they have been mad? What makes you think they would have reacted that way? Give examples. How do you think the kids in your own school would have reacted to this prank if you had done it? Do you think their reaction would have been different than those of the kids in this book? Explain your answer.
9. Niles says you should only prank people who deserve it. Do you agree or disagree with this statement. Is there ever a time that someone deserves to be made to look like a fool? Give reasons that support your arguments.

10. Do you think that Miles and Niles are alike in their personalities or different? What similarities and differences do you see in them? What traits do they each have that make it so they can’t get along at first? What traits do they each have that make it so they become such good friends later in the story?

11. Do you think Kevin Cornell’s illustrations made this book a better story? Why or why not? Do you prefer to read books that have pictures as part of the story—or do you like there to be no pictures so you can imagine the way things look in your own mind? Explain why you feel the way you do.
Boston Globe–Horn Book Award winner Mac Barnett (for *Extra Yarn*, with Jon Klassen) and Jory John (*All My Friends Are Dead*, with Avery Monsen) team up for a tale about an equally formidable pair of pranksters, *The Terrible Two*. It’s kind of like the pots calling the kettles, er, pots. I caught up with them via phone between — literally between; they were driving — school visits.

Roger Sutton: So where are you school-visiting?
Mac Barnett: We’re in Houston, Texas. We’re visiting twenty-two schools in one week, Roger. It’s pretty insane.

RS: And what do you talk about?
MB: We’re talking about pranks and how to be a prankster.
Jory John: It’s an instructional presentation on pranking. How to make your pranking notebook, places to hide it, things to write on the outside, including boring words like *form* and *business*.
MB: You know, the secret language of pranking. What we actually do is come in disguised as two people with terrible mustaches who are going to give a presentation on healthy eating choices. The kids almost rioted this morning when the principal announced the pranking presentation was canceled and instead they would be listening to an assembly about nutrition. The kids really lost it. It was a nice moment.

RS: Just what kind of role models are you presenting yourselves to be here?
MB: I’m not sure we’re presenting ourselves as real role models. I don’t think literature has ever been a real place for role models. It’s sort of a refuge for scoundrels, isn’t it, Roger?

RS: Mac, you should know better. You should have seen the tongue in my cheek.
MB: I know. You should have seen the tongue in my cheek. My tongue was almost in your cheek, Roger, that’s how—

RS: Oh, now it’s getting interesting. How did this book get started?
JJ: Mac and I have been friends for more than ten years. We met working at an educational nonprofit. And we have been pranking each other the whole time. It’s our own version of a prank war. We thought we would channel some of that energy into writing a book.

MB: The pranks were starting to take a toll on our friendship, so we said, “Why don’t we write a series of novels together? That’d be more productive.” But it turns out that it’s probably taken an even greater toll.

JJ: I would agree with that. Roger, I know I don’t know you very well, but I’m confiding in you.

MB: This isn’t getting published anywhere, is it?

RS: Thirty thousand people will be receiving this in their inboxes.

JJ: Okay, as long as it’s not 35,000.

RS: How does the collaboration work?

MB: Well — and this wouldn’t have been possible even two years ago — we opened up a Google doc while we were in the same room sitting across from each other. It’s basically a live file that has two cursors. So Jory and I would be typing in the same document, sometimes working on different sections, but sometimes shaping the same sentences at the same time. It was really kind of mind-blowing. There were times when I would send a character to one side of the room, and then Jory would move him back to the other side of the room. It was the exact thing that character would do, and he seemed to be doing it of his own accord. We both knew these characters really well, so it was amazing to just kind of watch them do things in front of your eyes.

RS: How did you resist the temptation to mess with each other? Would you prank each other while you were writing the book?

MB: Well, no. When we were writing the book it was mostly hard work and then watching a lot of TV.

JJ: We would always ease into the writing by watching about three to six hours of television.

RS: You know, old guys like me can get cranky about you smart alecks taking over children’s books.

MB: I like where this is going, Roger.

RS: We are seeing a new kind of humor in children’s books. I mean, Jon [Scieszka] and Lane [Smith] started giving it to us about twenty-five years ago. Now it’s everywhere.

MB: Jon and Lane are a big reason I got into children’s books. I read The Stinky Cheese Man as an adult. I missed that book when I was a kid. I grew up mostly with books bought at yard sales, picture books from the fifties to 1975, which is really a lucky thing. But Jon and Lane’s book is the kind of stuff I was reading and loving in college. I love those adult writers with the pranking ethos, DeLillo and Barthelme and David Foster Wallace. I don’t see any reason not to bring those kinds of influences to bear on books for
children. It’s a sort of patronizing idea that literature for children has to feature role models of exemplary behavior. I think not only is that bogus, but it leads to really boring books.

**RS:** True. So what envelope is this book pushing?

**MB:** I don’t think we’re trying to push an envelope. This is a book about pranking, which maybe carries with it subversion, but it’s rooted in the tradition of friendship books that I love.

**JJ:** Everybody in the book needs a friend. The two pranksters are basically loners up front. Mac and I both really like the character of the principal. Even though he’s a buffoon, even though he flies off the handle and plays favorites, we’re very sympathetic toward him.

**RS:** Sure. We understand why he is the way he is.

**MB:** If anything, I think the envelope it’s pushing is to inject real character, warmth, and friendship into comedy. I don’t know how groundbreaking that is, but that would be the only agenda that I had in mind.

**JJ:** I also think about the fresh start. Mac and I both had times when we moved, started new schools, and we know how hard that was, figuring out your identity and who you’re going to be at the new school.

**RS:** What do you each think the other brought to this project that you didn’t have yourself?

**MB:** The narrative voice is so much a fusion of the way that Jory writes jokes and the way that I write jokes. It’s this hybrid of our two styles and a classic one-plus-one-equals-three situation.

**JJ:** Absolutely. And I learned so much from Mac. I had mostly been writing humor books, and my instinct is generally to go for the joke. Mac would say, “This is what Miles misses about his old life. Let’s talk about some of the things he loved about his hometown.”

**RS:** By putting that kind of flesh on the bones of the joke, as it were, you do give readers a stake in what happens to these kids.

**MB:** I sure hope so. They mean a lot to us.

**RS:** This is only the first in a series. How are you envisioning things going?

**MB:** The first draft of the second book is finished. The second book is dealing with two questions. One is, should we feel bad for Principal Barkin? And two is, who is Niles, and how did he get that way? We’re getting to spend more time with these guys and figure out why everybody’s brains works the way they do, and why they feel the way they do about the world.

**RS:** Is that smart girl Holly going to discover their identity?

**MB:** That’s a great question. It doesn’t happen in book two, but I would definitely say it’s on the radar. That’s another big thing these books are about: who we show to the world and who we are underneath, and the fact that the things we hide are often the most interesting ones.
JJ: Did you like Holly as a character, Roger?

RS: I did. For a while I wondered if she was the prankster.
MB: That’s exactly what we wanted. That’s great to hear.

RS: I figured it was Niles or it was Holly. But then of course the cover, I guess, gives it away. I hadn’t even thought about that. I feel stupid now.
MB: No, Roger.
JJ: No way. Never.

RS: How did you work with the illustrator? Because a lot of the jokes land in the picture rather than in the text, so you needed more coordination than is usual for an illustrated novel.
MB: Definitely. Kevin Cornell and I have worked together a bunch.
JJ: We knew Kevin was right from the start. It was no accident that Kevin ended up with us. We picked him and submitted a package with his art because he was just so perfect for the book. We worked on exactly the right sort of scratchiness that we wanted from him, to point him in the right direction, and then he just nailed it. We call it a grand slam.
MB: I think the trick of writing a good picture book manuscript is to leave that space for illustration. An illustrated novel can do the same thing.

RS: I have one last question: Can either or both of you offer a moral defense of pranking?
MB: Oh, absolutely. Pranking is a great way to indicate the underlying absurdities of the world. There’s so much effort put into creating order, an order that is not necessarily true order or justifiable order. Pranking exposes the truth that underneath this appearance of order is joy, laughter, and disorder.
JJ: We were just talking about this in our last school visit, actually. People were asking about the lines between pranking and other types of mischief. Pranking is ultimately turning the world upside down. It’s in good fun.
MB: That phrase, “a harmless prank.” I think this is the point. Not only is a good prank harmless, but, like a good story, it reveals an essential truth that would otherwise be hidden.
JJ: Mac and I prank each other during our presentation. We show baby pictures of each other looking completely ridiculous. I can’t believe the frilly shirt that I’m in, and Mac’s wearing a sailor suit and playing a toy piano. That’s a perfect example of a good prank, where we have three hundred people literally laughing in our faces, three hundred kids at every assembly. And it feels really good. It’s really fun.
MB: And it says to them: this could happen to you. We put authors on such a pedestal, and it’s a moment that humanizes the whole thing, and lends an absurdity to what otherwise is a “please sit with your hands on your lap” kind of event.

RS: Have either of you ever had a prank go awry? That is, it really did end up being hurtful in a way you didn’t intend.
MB: That’s another thing that the second book is about, Roger, that exact feeling. It hasn’t happened with pranks as much as with jokes. I definitely have made jokes and people have been offended and hurt.
That feeling is the absolute worst. Even owning up to it and making amends is tough. There is a line, and that line gets crossed in the second book. Our characters are trying to figure out how they can right this wrong that they did.

RS: Looking forward to it. Enjoy Houston. You should take a ride through all the petroleum processing refineries on the road between Houston and Galveston. Have you been there at night? It’s amazing. The lights and the steam and the gas.
MB: Is this a prank?

RS: No, no. It’s beautiful.

Mac Barnett and Jory John, authors of The Terrible Two (2015), kicked off their book tour for the second installment of the series, The Terrible Two Get Worse (2016, both Abrams), on Saturday, January 10 at ALA Midwinter. By the time we met up, the pair had already spent the morning greeting librarian fans, signing books, and telling jokes—they are close friends who share a similar sense of humor and comedic timing, sometimes even finishing one another’s sentences. After finding a quiet spot away from the hubbub of the exhibits floor, we spoke about being a new kid, forging one’s identity, and the subversive—yet honorable—underpinnings of pranking. The conversation took a few detours, as Barnett and Jory riffed on each other’s answers. In book one, we met Miles, the new kid in Yawnee Valley who was the prank king at his last school, and Niles, a goody-two shoes who [SPOILER ALERT for those who haven’t read the first book!] turns out to be secret genius prankster mastermind.

JJ: That IS a spoiler alert!
MB: I haven’t actually finished the book yet…

Whoops—sorry about that! Didn’t mean to ruin it for you, Mac. In this relationship, is one of you a Miles, one a Niles?

MB: I think so. We definitely feel an affinity for both those characters, but I won’t dance around it: I feel like I’m a Niles.
JJ: Yeah, and I have more of an affinity to Miles. But there’s a lot of overlap in the characteristics between the two of us. Mac and I both grew up in single parent households; we both moved at pivotal points in our childhood, and had to start over at new schools and try to figure out our identities.
MB: I should say, just for the record—because I’ve heard this come up in many interviews I’ve done with you—I did not move at a pivotal point in my childhood.
[laughter]
MB: Sorry!
JJ: Huh. Really? Right, that was me.
MB: See, you are definitely a Miles.
JJ: Well, in any case, I did have that experience at age nine, moving from this beach town, Santa Cruz, CA, to the mountains of Lake Tahoe and I had to figure out who I was in relation to those kids. It was a difficult transition for a few years, for sure.

I love that part in the first book where Miles has that moment—he has to figure out what kind of kid he’s going to be. The cool kid, the sporty kid, the quirky kid with the strange socks?

JJ: That was one of our favorite parts, too.
MB: Though I didn’t move, I did switch schools as a kid and I think that is a really big part of it, that fantasy of the first day of school. That question of who am I going to be? It is a chance to reinvent yourself. But, of course, I think you always wind up just being some version of yourself, right?
JJ: Yeah, people always figure you out eventually.

That’s so true. I moved a lot as a kid and each time I thought to myself, now’s my chance. This time I’ll be the cool girl! But it never quite panned out that way.

JJ: That’s right—it never quite pans out. They always figure you out.
MB: You always become yourself.
JJ: I had that same experience where I thought, This time I’m going to be friends with all the popular kids. So I sort of moved into that circle for a second and I quickly realized—MG: Literally, Jory just physically moved and stood next to the cool kids. Which, you know, is not a good way to make friends. But that’s how we became friends. We were working together and Jory just kept coming over and just standing next to me. And on week three, I finally asked, What’s your name?
JJ: That’s exactly right…. Now I forget what point I was trying to make. I think there was one? That I’m...
MB: A Miles, you’re a Miles.
JJ: Yeah, exactly. That no matter what you’re trying to be, people always figure you out. And you figure out that maybe it’s okay to be that person—to be yourself—whether or not that’s accepted.
MB: See, I was able to answer that question in one sentence: “I’m more of a Niles.” Done.
JJ: Right, well, that’s because I’m more of a Miles. I ramble.
I’ve heard that you guys play pranks when you visit schools. Can you tell me about any recent pranks you’ve perpetrated on unsuspecting children?

MB: We have the principal tell the students something like, “I know we were going to have an author visit today, but I read this book last night and it’s about pranking and pranks at school, and pranking the principal. That’s not appropriate. That’s not our school spirit! To be honest, this book isn’t even any good! The author visit is canceled…. But, we’re going to do something even more fun: I called two local pediatricians and they’re going to talk to you about healthy eating choices. They’re called The Rockin’ Docs!”

JJ: And then, for the next 15 minutes, we give the worst presentation on healthy eating choices that the kids have ever seen.

MB: We come out in lab coats and fake mustaches. Sometimes the kids boo us. There are always a few kids who are like, “Those are the guys, those are the guys!” But as we proceed to show slide after slide about healthy eating, you can see the hope extinguish in their eyes.

JJ: It’s fun to get the principal involved because they really get into it. They get a chance to go up in front of their students and act. We only give them about five minutes of warning, they don’t know [until we arrive] that they’re about to “cancel” the event.

MB: We had this one principal…he threw our book on the floor and screamed, “This book isn’t funny!” Another time we had a librarian say—and I wish this was our introduction every time—she said to the kids, “You know I love you as much as my arms are wide. But I have to tell you, there are much better books than this one.” I love it. That is exactly the expectation I want every time I go on stage.

JJ: Then, by the time we rip off our mustaches and take off our lab coats, they cheer and go crazy. For the rest of the presentation, Mac and I go back and forth talking about all the pranks we’ve pulled on each other.

MB: It becomes a workshop on how to prank.

JJ: It’s this strange, circuitous path to an actual reading. We talk about how to be a prankster, we describe all these pranks we’ve pulled on each other. The kids get all riled up, but then we bring them back down again. We read from the book and things go really quiet. And we end with a coda—one more big prank. It’s a really fun presentation for us to do—and we’ve done a lot. We’ll be visiting about 20 schools next week.
Have you inspired any kids to create their own pranks? Any annoyed emails from parents or principals?

MB: We talk a lot about pranking notebooks, which is a big part of the book, and we get sent a lot of pictures of all these pranking notebooks teachers find. Kids write into our website, too. They write about the pranks that they’ve pulled and there’s a pranksters hall of fame. There’s a girl, Esther, who just wrote in. Esther froze a snowball and a couple weeks later woke up her sister, with the snowball in her hand, and said, “It’s a snow day!” That’s amazing!
JJ: We’ve also been on the other end of it. You remember the school that pranked us?
MB: Yes! As we were walking in, the principal told us that it was a testing day, not the best day to have an author visit.
JJ: And that the kids were working on their testing skills.
MB: So he warns us that the audience will be a bit smaller than anticipated.
JJ: Usually, we’re in an auditorium with about 500 kids.
MB: So, he tells us that because it’s testing day, we’re going to see the kids that are “really good at bubbling.”
JJ: So he leads us into this teeny tiny room with eight kids.
MB: And they each had their standardized test sheets that were all filled in, with comments in red pen from teachers that said thing like, “Great bubbles!” And the principal begins to introduce us.
JJ: And there’s a photo of us at that moment and both of our mouths are just wide open.
MB: We got totally worked. Of course, in retrospect, the idea of kids being in remedial bubbling is ridiculous. But at the time, it felt exactly right.
JJ: And then, of course, we were taken to the auditorium where there were 500 kids waiting. There was another school where they all held up massive cow signs at one point. So sometimes the kids will anticipate us and prank us when we get there.

Jory and Mac swearing in a group of kids into the “International Order of Disorder.” Photo credit: Jason Wells/Amulet Books.

The official pranking terminology used in the books, like “goat,” did you make that up? I Googled the International Order of Disorder, but couldn’t find any references.

MB: Well, it’s very secret.

Of course.
MB: We were very much inspired by the thieves’s argot. Any culture, especially an ultra secret subculture, needs to develop that language. So we wanted to develop a secret language of pranking. Pranking shares a lot in common with cons. But pranks are really recourse for the powerless—that’s what a great prank is. We made up these terms, but there are some amazing books on practical jokes.

JJ: The oath was really important to us. And it’s not just something in the book; we bring it to the schools and swear in all the kids [to the International Order of Disorder] at the end of our presentation. It’s another way of pulling them into that world.

One of the things I love about the book is the fact that even though these kids are pranksters, masters of mischief, up to no good, they are incredibly sweet kids. They have good hearts. There is an ethical basis, an honor code within the Order. Underlying the mayhem is a lot of heart.

MD: There are ethics to pranks. That’s what makes a prank a prank. They are anti-authoritarian, they are oftentimes absurdist, they subvert expectations. Last year, a kid asked us, “Do you consider yourself more pranksters or writers?” The truth is, good books are a lot like good pranks. They challenge the things that we’ve heard, they tell us new things about the world, they tell us the truth about our world, they can challenge authority. And, sometimes, they’re funny.

Tell us about book two. I understand that something quite unfortunate happens with Principal Barkin.

JJ: It starts with the “Golden Age of Pranking,” Miles and Niles are finally teamed up and really working together on lots of pranks.

MB: But then, Miles and Niles pull a prank which, regardless of their intentions, goes too far. And so they have that experience of a joke going too far and hurting someone. That’s a terrible, awful feeling. Principal Barkin is fired and replaced by his father, Principal Barkin. It’s very confusing! The new Principal Barkin shares his son’s disdain for pranking, but he has a much more severe way of handling them. Miles and Niles have to now deal with this new principal at school, but also come to terms with their ethical obligation for playing a prank that basically ruined someone’s life.

How does the writing process work for you two?

JJ: We’ve definitely experimented with every which way at this point. At the very beginning, when we lived in the same town, we had a regular writing day. The writing day preceded the book, actually. We were two relatively lonely fellas, sitting in our houses, with no schedule and
nowhere to go and not a lot of friends. So we’d come together every Monday and work on our various projects, whatever they were. Then we’d take a walk at lunch and talk about ideas. This [series] really sprung out of that.

MB: We talked a lot about books we loved as kids. I loved *Matilda*. That was one of my favorites, and Jory was a big fan of a series I hadn’t read as a kid, “The Great Brain.”

JJ: I was a huge fan of the “Great Brain” books. If you look at those books and *The Terrible Two*, there’s some parallels. That kind of goes back to that heart. There are stories in “The Great Brain” where, rereading them recently, I teared up. They’re so funny and filled with pranks, but you get to the chapter where they have a funeral for a dog and the whole town turns out, and it’s just so poignant.

MB: So, pretty soon [after the regular Monday writing days] we went from working on separate books to working on this idea together. We were writing it in Google docs. So we’d have this document open, and we’d be on our laptops, sitting across from one another, typing. Sometimes we’d work on separate sections, sometimes we’d work on the same sentence and literally be finishing each others sentences.

JJ: It was an interesting way to learn how to collaborate. I could see Mac’s sentence forming and finish it.

**You have to have a total mind meld to be able to pull that off successfully.**

MB: Yeah, I think Jory and I have this voice in the books that’s a real melding of the two of us. It’s a place that neither of us would have gotten to without the other.

JJ: A lot of our individual interests, too, were able to make it into the books.

MB: Jory’s a big fan of death metal. Which I’m not really into.

JJ: That’s not true. But we do have different answers for some of the elements in the book. For instance, why are there so many cows? We both love cows for different reasons. My passion came out of a love of “The Far Side.” I was so inspired by Gary Larson.

MB: Can we make the headline for this interview “Jory’s Passion for Cows”?